United States Department of Agriculture

NRCS

Natural Resources Conservation Service
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

MAR 0 1 2012

SUBJECT: Field Office of the Future

TO: NRCS State Conservationists
Presidents, State Soil and Water Conservation District Associations

We find ourselves in a time of change. The year 2012 brings with it an increasing demand on our field offices to deliver voluntary, incentive-based conservation on private lands throughout this great Nation. While the necessity for our work has never been higher, the pressure on our budgets (local, State, and National) has also escalated. This push and pull that we find ourselves in necessitates our taking a fresh, proactive look into the future to ensure that we control our own destiny as organizations and leaders in conservation. Therefore, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) are undertaking a unified effort to facilitate a locally-led process of evaluating the ability of our entire partnership, from top to bottom, to prepare to meet our mission now and in the years to come.

We must be proactive and own this improvement process. It is up to us to determine:

- How we can best meet the needs and expectations of our customers;
- How the field offices of the future should look and function;
- How we can focus our resources to get the most from our Nation's conservation investments;
- How we can design the most efficient and effective delivery system at a the local level; and
- How we can best prepare for any potential budget constraints.

Now is the time to identify our greatest efficiencies as conservation partners and build those into a strategy for the future. In doing so, we are requesting that you, our State leaders, develop an open, transparent, and inclusive process with your staff, partners, other stakeholders, and our customers to develop a plan that evaluates the organizational effectiveness of the field offices within your authority.

This plan must outline a vision of what your State's field offices of the future will look like including:

- A review of field offices co-located by NRCS and Conservation Districts;
- An identification of the types and levels of service to be provided in these "field offices of the future; and

- Opportunities for increased operational efficiencies and a contingency plan for potential budget constraints
  - Technology: how better use of the Web, video teleconferencing, and other technical advances can build service and improve cost efficiencies, accounting for ongoing improvement efforts such as the NRCS Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative,
  - Labor: division/coordination of duties between NRCS and conservation district staff,
  - Cost: identification of cost saving opportunities, i.e., relocating, merging, consolidating costs, closing out-of-date or unused office spaces, and partnering with other public agencies, and
  - Location: best able to serve the public.

*Your plan needs to include those areas listed above, as well as preparation for office closure locations should budget reductions require such.

While this list provides areas we expect to see delineated in the final plans, it is by no means exhaustive and may miss areas you feel important to highlight. We anticipate you will develop your own methods and instruments for your plan. No one knows conservation at the local level like you do, which makes you the best, most qualified conservation professional to help create the "field office of the future."

We have been evolving since the Dust Bowl days, but some things remain continuing priorities, such as our accessibility to land users and landowners. Farmers and ranchers should not have to drive for hours to get to a field office, and we must ensure that our range conservationists, soil scientists, soil conservationists, engineers, and agronomists are able to spend time in the field working with them one-on-one.

We request that each State send the final plan to their NRCS Regional Conservationist and NACD by September 1, 2012.

Thanks in advance for your knowledge, forward-thinking ideas, and partnership now and in the years to come.

Dave White
Chief
National Resources Conservation Service

Gene Schmidt
President
National Association of Conservation Districts

cc:
NRCS Regional Conservationists
NACD Regional Chairs
RC&D State Presidents
James Sipperly, President, National Association of RC&D Councils
Irene Moore, President, National Conservation District Employees Association
Mike Brown, Executive Director, National Association of State Conservation Agencies
Andrew Gordon, Executive Director/Counsel, National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils