

Part 409 – Conservation Planning Policy

NC409.0 General

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) planning procedures and standards as described and defined in the National Planning Procedures Handbook ([NPPH](#)) will be used for all conservation planning in North Carolina performed to support United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs and for all partner programs that NRCS provides technical assistance to.

NC409.1 Conservation Planning Objective

- (2) The goal of all conservation planning in North Carolina is the development and implementation of resource management systems (RMS). Conservation plans shall include explanation of alternatives needed to meet RMS criteria - regardless of whether or not the client is able to implement an RMS. Whenever an RMS level of treatment is not possible due to economic, social, cultural or other factors, the procedures for progressive planning as defined in the NPPH must be followed.

NC409.2 Conservation Planning Assistance Delivery

A. All citizens of North Carolina will have equal access to NRCS programs. Assistance provided will be in compliance with all Civil Right Acts, Non-discrimination statutes, and regulations of the Secretary of Agriculture.

D. Conservation planning is recognized as the cornerstone of the NRCS conservation delivery system. A conservation plan that meets NRCS national and state policies and procedures must be developed to document the provision of technical assistance and to support all financial assistance program contracts.

E. The Assistant State Conservationists for Field Operations (ASTC-FO) will identify those complex situations requiring Area-wide planning, the appropriate specialists to serve on interdisciplinary area teams, and when appropriate early-scoping processes are needed to assess the need for NRCS services and resources before committing planning assistance. Membership of the interdisciplinary teams will be identified based on the needs of the specific projects. The NRCS North Carolina Management Team will make similar determinations when needed for situations that span multiple NRCS administrative areas.

NC409.3 Requirements for Providing Conservation Planning Assistance

A. It is NRCS policy to have adequately trained and well-qualified employees to provide conservation planning assistance. All NRCS employees who independently provide conservation planning assistance, or who approve or sign conservation plans, must have a Certified Conservation Planner designation.

- (1) In North Carolina, all NRCS soil conservationist positions located at the field level are required to actively pursue the training, experience, and plan development requirements required to obtain their CCP designation. All District Conservationists must take all actions possible to acquire their CCP designation within 1-year of becoming a District Conservationist. Employee training plans and performance standards shall be developed to reflect those requirements.

- (3) Training will be provided to assist employees in acquiring and maintaining CCP certification.
 - (i) Basic Certification training requirements are listed on Form NC-CCP-01, Documentation of Completed Training or Waiver. This certification will be issued based on the completion of training, experience, and proven competency. The knowledge, skills, and abilities required for a Certified Conservation Planner designation are listed on Form NC-CCP-02, Documentation of On-Site Field Review of Conservation Plan.
 - (ii) NRCS will make training and certification available to employees of other conservation partnership organizations that wish to participate. As resources and national policies permit, training and certification will also be available to conservation volunteers and commercial providers (third party vendors) who wish to participate.

B. Non-certified NRCS employees and other non-certified individuals may assist in the planning process; however, all USDA-related conservation plans must be approved by a Certified Conservation Planner.

C. Certified Conservation Planner Requirements:

- (4) In North Carolina, a Certification Review Panel will be established to assist the State Conservationist in verifying that individuals meet the minimum criteria to be certified.

D. The Certification Review Panel, on behalf of the State Conservationist, will maintain a current list of Certified Conservation Planners in North Carolina and the current status of each person certified or working towards certification or recertification.

NC409.5 Documentation of Conservation Planning Data

The required content of conservation plans in North Carolina is listed on Form NC-CCP-04, Checklist for Reviewing Conservation Plans. The required contents must be documented and organized according to NC Supplement to NPPH 600. In most cases, conservation plan maps should be prepared electronically using GIS to ensure a professional, accurate map base for the planning decisions.

NC409.9 Minimum Criteria to Achieve an NRCS Certified Conservation Planner Designation

A. The criteria for certification of NRCS, Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) employees, or other partnership employees who provide technical assistance through a local NRCS or SWCD office are as follows:

- (1) The ASTC-FO should send Form NC-CCP-01 to the Certification Review Panel documenting the employee's completion of the following training:
 - (i) Orientation for New Employees course (NC).
 - (ii) Basics of Conservation Planning course (NC) and/or the NRCS Boot Camp Course (NEDC). **NOTE:** The decision on which of these courses is required will be made on a case-by-case basis by the State Conservationist.
 - (iii) NRCS Conservation Planning course, Modules 1-9 (NC & NEDC). **NOTE:** In North Carolina, the conservation plan that is field reviewed (requirement c above) serves as successful completion of Module 9 for the NEDC Conservation Planning course.

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- (iv) Introduction to Field Office Technical Guide course (NEDC)
 - (v) Cultural Resources 2-day course (NC)
 - (vi) Assessment Tools (RUSLE2, WHSI, etc.)
 - (vii) Environmental Compliance Level 1 (NEDC)
 - (viii) NC-CPA-52 Training (NC)
 - (ix) Any additional training required to ensure competence to address locally-specific resource concerns, as identified by the ASTC-FO.
- (2) The employee shall submit to the ASTC-FO three (3) RMS level conservation plans for review. Only one plan shall be submitted at any given time to ensure that errors will not be duplicated in following plans. Planning for cropland, pastureland, and forest land must be addressed at least once within the three plans submitted. A completed “Checklist for Reviewing Conservation Plans,” Form NC-CCP-04 shall accompany each plan submitted.
- (3) The Area Office (AO) technical staff will review the plans submitted, and provide training to the applicant to revise the plan to meet NRCS planning policy contained in the National Planning Procedures Handbook, the Field Office Technical Guide, and any NC supplements related to conservation planning. The AO technical staff will then furnish the applicant with comments and instructions regarding follow-up actions. The applicant will have 60 days to complete any required follow-up. If the follow-up has not been completed in the 60 days, or if the plan returned still does not meet policy, then the applicant may be given an additional 30 days after consultation with the AO technical staff. If the follow-up has not been returned to the AO technical staff or does not meet policy within the additional thirty days, then the ASTC-FO will take the appropriate personnel action for failure to meet requirements in NC409.3 A.(1). All non-NRCS applicants shall submit a new plan for CCP certification when such failure occurs.
- (4) After ensuring the conservation plan meets NRCS policy, the ASTC-FO will submit each of the three plans to the Certification Review Panel with a completed Form NC-CCP-05. The Certification Review Panel will review the plan and either approve the plan, or return it for any required follow-up. The applicant will have 30 days to complete any required follow-up. If the follow-up has not been returned to the Certification Review Panel, or does not meet policy within the additional thirty days, then the Assistant State Conservationist for Technology (ASTC-T) will notify the ASTC-FO to take the appropriate personnel action for failure to meet requirements in NC409.3 A.(1). All non-NRCS applicants shall submit a new plan for CCP certification when such failure occurs.
- (5) For each applicant, the ASTC-FO shall submit Form NC-CCP-02 documenting the successful completion of an onsite field review of one of the three RMS level conservation plans submitted. The plan selected for field review must contain cropland and at least one other land use. Minimum participation in the field review includes the planner, the ASTC-FO or designee, and (if scheduling permits) the client. The purpose of the field review is to assess the planner’s ability to implement the steps of planning as described in the NPPH, including:
- (i) Identify and inventory resource concerns in the field.
 - (ii) Work collaboratively with the client to identify his/her objectives.
 - (iii) Formulate technically sound resource management systems to address these concerns.
 - (iv) Review the plan and its components with the client.
- (6) Certification of third party vendors, outside professionals, or employees of other agencies who do not provide technical assistance through a local NRCS or SWCD office shall be handled through the Technical Service Provider Certified

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Conservation Planner criteria as defined at the TechReg website (<http://www.techreg.usda.gov>). Form NC-CCP-03, Request for Certification (Non-NRCS/Partnership) is no longer valid for CCP in North Carolina.

- E. Once certified, a planner must meet an annual continuing education requirement.
- (1) All certified planners are required to obtain at least 15 contact hours of technical training each fiscal year (October 1 through September 30) on subjects related to conservation planning or natural resource management. Technical training provided by the following agencies on topics related to natural resources management or planning is considered eligible for meeting this requirement:
 - (i) NRCS/Conservation Partnership
 - (ii) NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
 - (iii) NC Cooperative Extension Service
 - (iv) NC Wildlife Resources Commission
 - (v) NC Division of Forest Resources
 - (2) All other training must be approved by the Certification Review Panel. The ASTC-T approves hours of continuing education credit for statewide training events. The ASTC-FO, or their designee, approves hours of continuing education credit for area-specific or locally facilitated training.
 - (3) Individual planners are responsible for keeping their own personal training plan updated to reflect training received to meet this requirement and to indicate to their supervisor what additional training is needed to maintain their planner certification.
 - (i) Documentation of training to meet the continuing education requirement will be provided to the Certification Review Panel upon request.
 - (ii) For Technical Service Providers who hold a CCP certification, continuing education and quality assurance requirements are specified by the Technical Service Provider policy and guidelines.

F. The Certification Review Panel is chaired by the Assistant State Conservationist for Technology (ASTC-T). At a minimum, other members of the Certification Review Panel will include an ASTC-FO, an Area Resource Conservationist, an NC DENR-DSWC representative, an Engineer, an ECS Technical Specialist, and a Soil Scientist. Members will be selected by the State Conservationist. The roles of the Panel are:

- (1) To ensure that the conservation planning training and other related technical training available in North Carolina is sufficient to support an adequately trained and well qualified cadre of conservation planners to support USDA and other programs.
- (2) To review all documentation submitted, including the conservation plans, to assess compliance with NRCS planning policy and guidelines, as well as certification criteria established.
- (3) To issue CCP certification to individuals approved to independently develop conservation plans for USDA related assistance.
- (4) To maintain, on behalf of the State Conservationist, a current list and status of Certified Conservation Planners for North Carolina.
- (5) To maintain current information about NRCS' Certified Conservation Planner program on the agency's web site.
- (6) To propose changes in the NRCS certification policy and procedures as needed to the State Conservationist.
- (7) To hear and make recommendations to the State Conservationist on all appeals involving certification.

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- (8) The Certification Review Panel chair, or their designee, shall annually field review 5 percent of plans submitted for CCP certification and/or recertification that require field review.

G. All documentation and correspondence to the Certification Review Panel should be sent to:

USDA-NRCS
CCP Certification Review Panel
Attn: ASTC-Technology
4407 Bland Road, Suite 117
Raleigh, NC 27609

- (1) Each ASTC-FO is responsible for quality assurance reviews of NRCS and Partnership certified planners to assure completed plans meet NRCS policy, and that certified planners are meeting the continuing training requirement.
 - (i) Quality assurance for certified planners is handled through GM-NC-340.404.22 Policy, Subpart C, Quality Assurance and the additional guidance provided in this section. When the ASTC-FO's Field Office Appraisal (NC-QA-3) indicates five or more agreed-to items occurred in the form's first five sections, then the Certified Conservation Planner designation shall be revoked according to the procedures outlined below in G.(3).
 - (ii) Additionally, Form NC-CCP-02, Documentation of On-site Field Review of Conservation Plan must be submitted to the CCP Certification Review Panel for recertification or reinstatement.
- (2) In addition to the formal Field Office Appraisals, the ASTC-FO (or designee) may review conservation plans selected for:
 - (i) Annual practice spot-checks, and/or
 - (ii) Any occasion that requires review of a conservation plan outside the routine quality assurance process. When such a review identifies a Conservation Plan failing to meet NRCS policy, the reviewer will document findings on the NC-QA-2 and NC-QA-3 forms. If there are five or more agreed-to items occurred in the NC-QA-3's first five sections, then the Certified Conservation Planner designation shall be revoked according to the procedures outlined below in G.(3).
- (3) If planning certification is revoked from NRCS employees identified in NC409.3 A.(1), the Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations (ASTC-FO) will notify the Assistant State Conservationist for Technology (ASTC-T) of revoking the employee's certification within five (5) working days. The following actions will be taken.
 - (i) In consultation with the ASTC-T, the ASTC-FO shall issue a letter directing the employee to complete one RMS Conservation Plan on two different land uses to be submitted for an on-site field review to the Area Office and approved by the Certification Review Panel no later than 90 days from the date of the letter of direction. Please note multiple landowners or conservation plans may be needed to satisfy the dual land use requirement. The ASTC-T and ASTC-FO may also specify land uses and conservation practices to be included in the plan. If the employee develops a RMS plan and it meets the certification requirements in General Manual Title 180, Part 409, the employee will then be recertified.
 - (ii) If the employee does not complete the RMS plan within the 90 day period, or submits a plan which does not meet the requirements of General Manual Title 180, Part 409, the ASTC-FO will take appropriate disciplinary action in regard to the employee's failure to meet NC409.3 A.(1). If the employee develops a RMS plan within the 30 day timeframe and the plan meets the certification

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requirements in General Manual, Title 180, Part 409, the employee will then be recertified.

- (iii) If an RMS plan is not developed within the additional 30 days, or if the plan does not meet the requirements in General Manual, Title 180, Part 409, the ASTC-FO will work with the State Conservationist to take the appropriate personnel action.
- (4) If planning certification is revoked or lost from non-NRCS planners or NRCS planners not identified in NC409.3 A.(1), they may be reinstated providing they submit one RMS-level plan for on-site field review to the Area Office within one year. That plan must contain cropland and at least two other land uses, must be field reviewed, and must be approved by the Certification Review Panel. If the planner does not re-apply within one year, they must meet the certification criteria as defined for a new planner.