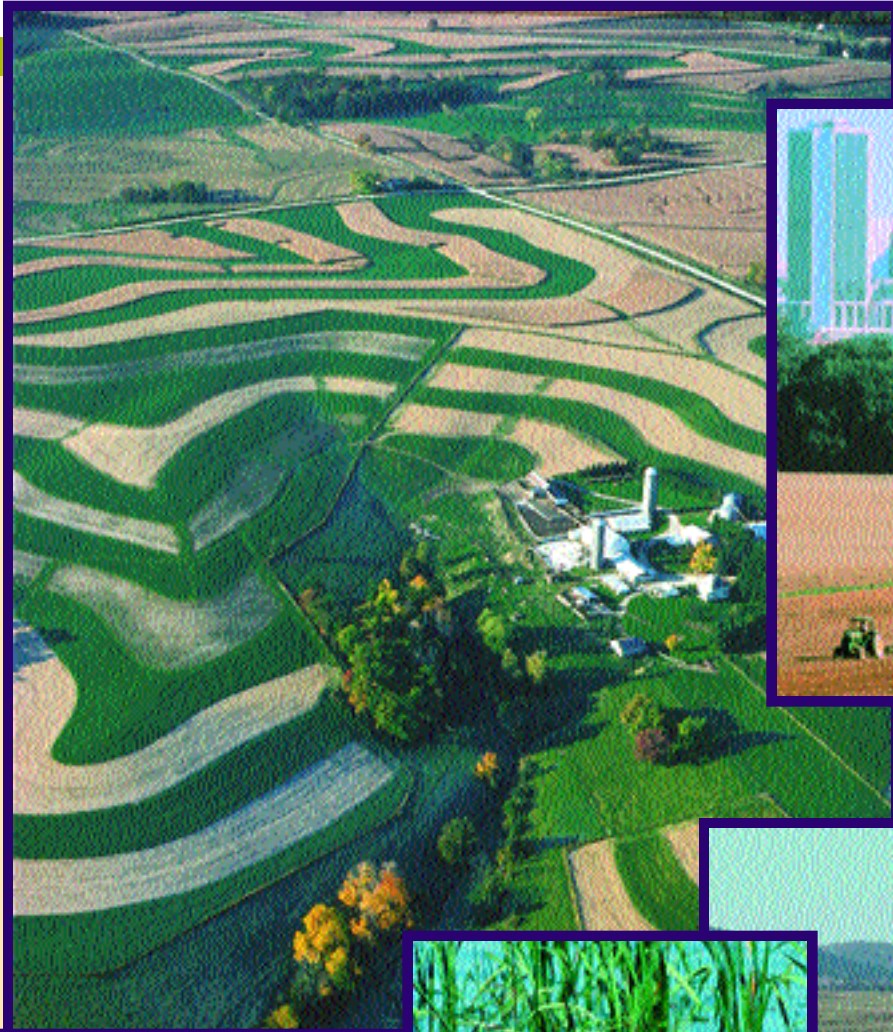


Interim Appraisal and Analysis of Conservation Alternatives



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This report is a publication of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). As the Department of Agriculture's lead conservation agency, NRCS works in partnership with the American people to conserve and sustain natural resources on private lands.

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USDA/NRCS

A Resources Conservation Act Report

Interim Appraisal
and Analysis of
Conservation Alternatives

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Overview

In 1977, Congress passed Public Law 95-192, the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act, which addressed the importance of conserving soil and water resources on private and other non-federal lands. The Act directed the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to develop a national soil and water conservation program and to periodically assess the condition of the nation's soil, water and other natural resources.

Since then, USDA has issued several reports that assess the condition of and trends in soil, water and related resources. The results guide the department's soil and water conservation priorities and have been the basis for improvements in the nation's overall conservation efforts.

In 1982, responding to extensive public comments that strongly favored linking USDA benefits with conservation goals, the Department introduced the concept of cross compliance in the national conservation program. Congress subsequently incorporated cross-compliance provisions for highly erodible lands and for wetlands in the 1985 farm bill.

In 1989, the program update focused on critical resource problems and on the need to strengthen conservation partnerships. Conservation priorities included reducing the damage caused by excessive soil erosion on rural lands and protecting the quality of surface and ground water against harmful contamination from non-point

sources. Conservation provisions in the farm bills of 1990 and 1996 incorporated many of these priorities.

This report, "A Resources Conservation Act Report: Interim Appraisal and Analysis of Conservation Alternatives," describes conditions and trends in soil, water and other environmental resources based on the most recent work of USDA's National Resources Inventory, Census of Agriculture and other reliable government and non-government sources. It discusses conservation needs identified by USDA, conservation partners and numerous land users through discussions at public hearings and other forums and during deliberations over proposed legislation and policy.

The report identifies technical assistance and financial incentives to accomplish different resource conservation objectives based on analysis of possible conservation initiatives. The initiatives include reducing erosion on all cropland, implementing a cropland stewardship proposal, accomplishing two million miles of buffers for the nation's waterways, enrolling 250,000 additional acres per year in the Wetlands Reserve Program, investing \$65 million per year in the Farmland Protection Program and expanding the Conservation Reserve Program to 45 million acres. Overall results indicate that there are significant opportunities to improve soil, water and other environmental conditions into the future.

Partnerships with state, local and tribal governments, conservation districts and landowners form the core of USDA's conservation programs. The Department's expert technical assistance, available to landowners who request help, is the basis for program successes. Economic incentives for conservation practices also play a vital role in the conservation programs.