
Understanding the NRCS Planning Process

WHAT IS CONSERVATION PLANNING?

The **Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)** was created in 1935 to assist individuals and groups in identifying and solving conservation problems on private lands through a partnership with local **soil and water conservation districts (SWCD)**. The NRCS, with help from its partners, continues to help clients prepare conservation plans for the lands they make decisions on. The process is voluntary and participatory. Each client serves as the final decision maker throughout the process.

WHAT IS A CONSERVATION PLAN?

A Conservation Plan is a written record of your management decisions and the conservation practices and systems you plan to use, develop and maintain on your farm or ranch. Carrying out your plan will help achieve the goals of protecting the environment and your natural resources. After soil, water, air, plant, and animal resources are inventoried and evaluated, the NRCS or SWCD Certified Conservation Planner will review and offer possible alternatives **for you to consider**. The alternatives you decide are recorded in a conservation plan, which becomes the roadmap to help you achieve your goals and maintain the resources of your land.

WHAT IS IN A CONSERVATION PLAN?

- An aerial photo or diagram of your farm or ranch
- A map of the soils on your farm or ranch and descriptions of those soils
- Information on grasses, trees and broad-leaved plants that grow on your farm or ranch
- Resource inventory data which can include crop production potential, engineering designs and support data, potential livestock and wildlife carrying capacity
- The location and schedule for applying conservation practices
- A plan of operation and maintenance for conservation systems of practices
- Job sheets and fact sheets

HOW IT HELPS THE LAND

Conservation of the natural resources (soil, water, air, plant, and animal resources) is important to the future of Texas. NRCS can provide help with such issues as animal waste management, water quality, soil erosion, grazing land management, engineering, and other conservation needs.

HOW IT HELPS THE YOU

Healthy private land is America's strength. Healthy working land is the foundation of a prosperous American agriculture industry, the cornerstone of environmental quality and the core of healthy communities.

WHERE TO GET HELP

For assistance in developing long range conservation plans, contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service or Soil and Water Conservation District office.

WHERE THE PROCESS APPLIES

The conservation planning process is used by all NRCS/ SWCD planners to provide assistance to clients. It is important for clients to understand how NRCS approaches conservation planning to be prepared for the conservationist and to have the same expectations when the conservationist visits their site.

The NRCS conservation planning process includes 9 steps. Each step is designed to provide parts that will eventually result in a fully implemented conservation plan. These steps do not necessarily occur in a sequential order and many steps may occur simultaneously.

THE PROCESS – THE NINE STEPS OF CONSERVATION PLANNING

Preplanning

The conservation planner prepares for a site visit by anticipating the conservation problems that may be encountered. This may require research and self improvement study. They also assemble the basic information for the planning area such as soil surveys, plant yields, water quality issues, and other related information.

Step 1. Identify Problems.

The conservation planner assists the client in determining the resource problems, opportunities, and concerns in the planning area. This includes an early identification of all natural resource problems. This will be further clarified as the process continues.

Step 2. Determine Objectives.

The conservation planner must record the client's objectives. This might include how the area is to be used, what is the intended use of the property over the long term, what are the family considerations, and other factors that might influence the choice of conservation practices to be applied.

Step 3. Inventory Resources

A comprehensive inventory will be completed of the natural resources, such as the soils, plants, animals, physical structures, available labor, equipment, and anything else that might be needed to solve the conservation problems.

Step 4. Analyze Resource Data

The information gathered in Step 3 will be analyzed to clearly define the conditions of the natural resources along with the economic and social issues. The causes and effects of conservation problems will be summarized.

Step 5. Formulate Alternatives

One or more conservation alternatives are prepared that will achieve the client's objectives, solve the natural resource problems, and take advantage of opportunities to improve or protect resource conditions. Clients will be provided any products explaining the details of the conservation practices being considered. This would include job sheets, fact sheets, standards, or similar materials.

Step 6. Evaluate Alternatives

Each of the alternatives is evaluated to determine if it is addressing the client's objectives and the natural resource problems. The effects of the alternatives should be evaluated both for on-site and off-site impacts. The alternative should also be acceptable to the client. Special attention will need to be given to those ecological values protected by law or Executive Order.

Step 7. Make Decisions

The client selects the alternatives that will best serve their business. The conservationist then prepares the conservation plan of operations (CPO) for the client which includes the practices to be implemented and the schedule. The CPO is a record of conservation decisions made by the client.

Step 8. Implement Plan

The conservation planner delivers the plan to the client and reviews it for accuracy and clarity. The plan contains a listing of the conservation practices and a schedule for implementation. Included with these practices should be a description of the impacts of the selected practices on their natural resources. Plans usually include a map, field boundaries, soil map and other items specific to the clients' property. The conservationist may also include other alternatives that the client has not or is not ready to make a decision on, but are needed to protect the resource. The client then requests needed assistance from the NRCS to implement the practices.

Step 9. Evaluate the Plan

NRCS will assist the client to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan as it is implemented. Conditions often change and may bring about the need to adjust the plan. NRCS will use information gathered during evaluations to "fine-tune" our conservation practices in meeting natural resource needs.

MAINTAINING THE PROCESS

The NRCS conservation planning process is dynamic because people and natural resources are dynamic. These nine steps should not be regimented. It may be necessary to go back through the process at any time because of unanticipated changes. The client should always be aware that the conservation plan is their plan and can be adjusted as needs change.

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