

Title 120 – General Manual

Part 402 - Communications

Subpart A - Correspondence

402.0 Scope

This subpart outlines NRCS correspondence policies and procedures for National Headquarters, region, State, and field offices. (Note: Further information on correspondence preparation is available in the NRCS Correspondence Reference Guide.)

402.1 Letters and Memorandums

There are formats identified as letters and memorandums. The principal difference between a letter and a memorandum is that a memorandum contains the captions "SUBJECT" and "TO" and does not include a complimentary closing. Letters, in contrast, use an inside address, salutation, and complimentary closing.

A. The letter format (see [402.80](#)) is required for:

(1) Congressional correspondence;

(2) General public correspondence when a salutation and complimentary close are considered appropriate; and

(3) Internal correspondence (within NRCS) when a personal touch is important; (for example: letters of commendation, condolence, and retirement.)

B. Memorandum format (see [402.81](#)) is required for internal (NRCS) and executive correspondence (outside NRCS, but within the executive branch) if a letter is not appropriate.

402.2 Required Response Time

A. Required response times for answering Congressional and general public correspondence is 5 business days after receipt in an NRCS office. If a final answer cannot be completed within 5 business days, an interim reply should be sent within 5 business days and contain a date when the final reply will be sent. If possible, the final reply should be made within 5 business days after the interim reply is sent. Exceptions to these times can be made if the incoming correspondence concerns normal day-to-day operations with customers, contractors, etc., about their farm plans, contracts, agreements, and so forth.

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B. Internal correspondence will be answered within 10 business days or send an interim reply that contains a date when the final reply will be sent.

C. It is the policy of NRCS that all official requests from National Headquarters to regions, States, and field offices will be made in writing and electronically transmitted via email or fax. All other types of requests will not be considered official and will not require a response. The originating office will retain the file copy with the original signature.

D. It is the policy of NRCS that correspondence and directives sent from National Headquarters to States offices and below that contain an “Action Required By” date will allow a minimum of 30 business days to respond. In instances where 30 business days is not possible an explanation will be included within the request.

E. It is the policy of NRCS that, to the maximum extent possible, required responses or actions will minimize or avoid field level involvement and utilize electronic systems to collect and transmit the information.

WA402.2 Required Response Time

A. It is the policy of NRCS-WA that all official requests from the State office and area offices to field offices be made in writing and electronically transmitted via e-mail or fax. Requests that are not in writing will not require a response. The originating office will retain the file copy with the original signature.

B. It is the policy of NRCS-WA that correspondence and directives sent from State office and area offices that contain an “Action Required By” date will allow a minimum of 21 business days to respond. In instances where the minimum of 21 business days is not possible, an explanation will be included with the request.

C. It is the policy of NRCS-WA that, to the maximum extent possible, required responses or actions will minimize or avoid field level involvement and utilize electronic systems to collect and transmit the information.

D. All responses to requests outlined above are to be made in writing and submitted by the date due.

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402.3 Signature Authority

All correspondence, Federal Register documents, and National Bulletins with an "Action Required By" date must be edited by the Correspondence Management Staff (CMS) before forwarding for signature. Signature Authority for "Action Required By" correspondence and directives are delegated to the Chief, Associate Chief, or a Deputy Chief. For large documents with 20 or more pages, allow CMS 3 business days for editing. All responses to requests signed by other than the Chief, Associate Chief, or a Deputy Chief will be considered optional.

WA402.3 Signature Authority

This subpart establishes policy for Washington NRCS State office correspondence going to other Federal agency heads, State agency heads, congressional delegations, NRCS field offices, NRCS area offices, NRCS national headquarters, counterparts in other agencies, conservation district offices, and the general public.

A. State office correspondence addressed to the NRCS Chief, Associate Chief, Deputy Chiefs, Associate Deputy Chiefs, Regional Assistant Chiefs, and Directors at national headquarters; other Federal agency heads; State agency heads; and congressional delegations will be signed by the State Conservationist.

Correspondence addressed to the general public or conservation district chairpersons will be signed by the appropriate line officer, SLT member, or their designee.

B. Correspondence committing funds, equipment, or personnel will be routed by the preparer to the program manager and State Administrative Officer for concurrence prior to signature by the State Conservationist.

C. Correspondence committing NRCS technical and/or financial assistance will be signed by the State Conservationist.

The Budget Officer should provide financial management input with recommended actions/projections.

D. Correspondence addressed to counterparts in other Federal and State agencies relaying information only may be signed by line officers, SLT members, or their technical staff.

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E. Correspondence addressed to NRCS field offices and area offices relaying information may only be signed by a principal staff member/Washington Leadership Team member (as defined in General Manual, Title 360, Part 404, Subpart D, Supplement WA01) or a member of their staff where delegated.

F. Correspondence from the NRCS State, area, or field office that requests time input and services or requires action will be signed by the appropriate line officer or SLT member.

G. "All employee" e-mails should only be sent by the Washington Leadership Team or their staffs (State office technical specialists). A Special Emphasis Program Manager (e.g., Federal Women's Program Manager, Hispanic Emphasis Program Manager, etc.) can also send e-mails to all our employees to provide information on special observances. The following guidelines will be adhered to:

(1) E-mails should be well written and use concise, descriptive subjects; good judgment should be exercised in composing e-mails.

(2) Target communications. Messages should only be sent to those people who need to receive the information; "all employee" e-mails will be used only as needed. "All employee" e-mails will be submitted to the State Conservationist's Secretary, or acting, for distribution.

(3) Do not send unnecessary attachments. Large attachments should be zipped (WinZip) before sending. When appropriate, include links to documents rather than sending the full text version

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402.4 NRCS Record Copies

A. NRCS Letterhead

Use NRCS letterhead for letters and copies as follows:

	First Page	Succeeding Pages
Original outgoing	Letterhead bond	Plain bond
Courtesy (if necessary)	Copy of outgoing	Plain white paper
Copy to other than addressee outside NRCS	Copy of outgoing	Plain white paper
Official file copy	Yellow paper	Yellow paper
Reader copy	White paper	White paper
Other NRCS copies (as needed)	White paper	White paper

B. Courtesy Copy

(1) A courtesy copy is an exact copy of the original, if furnished as a courtesy for congressional or other Federal agency heads. Do not send courtesy copies not requested.

(2) For a copy to a person other than the addressee, type "cc" and the recipient's name, title, and address two lines below the signer's title, or the enclosure listing, if any. The "cc:" listing shows on the original and all copies. If the addressee is not to know to whom photographic copies were sent, type "bcc:" on the copies but not on the original.

Yellow - NRCS official record copy. The yellow copy provides a complete record. The original incoming letter, note, etc., with any enclosures becomes a part of the official record copy. Copies of any enclosures dispatched with the original of the outgoing communication must be made a part of the official record copy.

White - White bond paper is used for any additional copies within NRCS.

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C. Records. All papers, photographs, maps, books, or other documentary materials, regardless of physical form or characteristics, that have documentary or evidential value. Such materials, created or received in connection with the agency's business, are preserved as evidence of its organization, functions, policies, decisions, or because of their informational value. Official files also called record material, can be destroyed only according to authorized disposal schedules. Electronic records are subject to the same laws and regulations as paper records. Electronic records may be destroyed only in accordance with a records disposition schedule approved by the Archivist of the United States, including General Records Schedules. For additional information on records, see GM_120_408.htm.

402.5 Informal Communication Techniques

Informal communications may be handled by using one of the following techniques.

A. **Informal Replies** - When a simple interim reply, transmittal, or informal comment is appropriate, it may be typed on the incoming letter and returned to the sender. This method is used when the original incoming letter and the added comments do not need to be retained. The informal technique may be used to send a requested publication, etc. A memorandum is an informal reply.

B. **Routing and Reference Slip** - Optional Form-41 may be used to transmit documents to one or more offices or employees. No record (file) copy of the routing slip should be made.

402.6 Special Handling

A. Material marked "FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY" is available only for NRCS employees who need the material for their official work. Do not distribute this material or furnish copies to persons outside NRCS unless you have the approval of the Regional Conservationist, State Conservationist or other supervising administrator. You cannot examine such material unless it is needed to perform official duties. This applies to both internal and executive correspondence. You are authorized to mark outgoing correspondence and other material "FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY" when it is in reply to incoming material so marked or you have special written authorization from the Regional Conservationist, State Conservationist, or other supervising administrator.

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B. If correspondence is to be so restricted, the words "FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY" should appear in capital letters centered at the top and bottom of the first page only of the original and each copy.

C. Restricted correspondence should be sent in a sealed envelope addressed to an individual, a position, or particular office so that it can be delivered unopened. The envelope is to be marked "FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY" in the lower right hand of the envelope beside the address.

D. Restricted correspondence envelopes may additionally be marked:

- (1) To Be Opened By Addressee Only.
- (2) To be Opened By State Conservationist Only (or other position).to be Opened By "John Doe" Only

402.7 Filing

Correspondence will be filed in accordance with NRCS filing system. For additional information on the filing system, see [GM_120_408_a_b_d.rtf](#).

402.8 Writing

Observe the following when writing NRCS correspondence:

A. Use clear, factual, and simple language and instructions. Picture the reader as you compose.

- (1) Write in the active voice;
- (2) Use simple, familiar words;
- (3)Use short words and sentences;
- (4)Limit sentences to one thought; and
- (5)Cut useless words and information.

B. Answer promptly with courteous and responsive replies.

C. Date outgoing correspondence the day it is signed.

D. Refer to the letter you are answering, when appropriate.

E. Use the correct subject code in the subject line of all informal correspondence, and the corresponding file code number.

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