

**Title 180 – General Manual**  
**PART 409 - Conservation Planning Policy**

**WA409.0 General.**

(a) This document establishes Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) policy for providing conservation planning assistance to clients. The Director of the Conservation Operations Division (COD) has the functional oversight for this policy. As part of this oversight, the Director of COD will establish a tracking and quality assurance system to assess the progress of states in implementing conservation planner training, certification and maintenance programs. *This supplement establishes Washington Natural Resources Conservation Service (WA-NRCS) conservation planning and planner certification policy.*

(b) State Conservationists may supplement this policy, as needed, to provide specific guidance and to comply with State, tribal and local laws and regulations. A copy of each State supplement will be sent to the appropriate Regional Conservationist (RC) and Director, COD.

(c) The [National Planning Procedures Handbook \(NPPH\)](#) provides procedures and guidance on implementing this planning policy, including relationships to the [Field Office Technical Guide \(FOTG\)](#), electronic storage of data, technical handbooks, and program guidance in the planning process. The NRCS planning process and standards as outlined in the NPPH will be used for all conservation planning.

(d) In cases where NRCS is assisting, or is assisted by other agencies or groups, NRCS planning procedures and plan format may be modified to meet those specific client needs.

**WA409.1 Conservation Planning Objective.**

(a) The objective in conservation planning is to help each client attain sustainable use and sound management of soil, water, air, plant, and animal resources. The purpose is to prevent the degradation of resources and to ensure their sustained use and productivity, while considering the client's economic and social needs.

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(1) The NRCS conservation planning process emphasizes development of resource management systems (RMS). An RMS is a combination of conservation practices and resource management activities for the treatment of all identified resource concerns for soil, water, air, plants, animals, and humans that meets or exceeds the quality criteria in the FOTG for resource sustainability.

(2) The minimum level of treatment to strive for in the planning process is the RMS. Progressive planning is used to work toward an RMS when a client is ready, willing, and able to make some, but not all of the decisions necessary to achieve an RMS level of management.

(b) When programs or initiatives exist, for example, Highly Erodible Land provisions that define other levels of planning for specific resource issues, clients will be offered alternatives that, as a minimum, meet the criteria of those programs. However, the conservation planner will encourage the client, who is a participant in programs that are related to specific resource issues, to develop an RMS plan or progressive plan as appropriate. This will help the client identify and address all resource concerns and provide a plan to use with other existing or future programs.

(c) Resource management objectives of NRCS' clients are addressed through the development of individual conservation plans, area wide conservation assessments, and area wide conservation plans. Clients develop plans and assessments with conservation planning assistance from NRCS, conservation districts, Resource Conservation and Development Councils, and other appropriate sources. NRCS conservation planning assistance is based on ecological, economic, and social considerations relative to the resources. When NRCS provides conservation planning assistance, on-site visits with clients are an integral part of that assistance.

(d) Conservation plans are the basis for all assistance NRCS provides to clients and the basic tool for them to manage their natural resources. The conservation plan, however, is just one product of the planning process. The greatest value comes by having the client engaged in every step of the planning process. The client develops an understanding of the natural resource issues, interactions and treatments necessary for resource sustainability.

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**WA409.2 Conservation Planning Assistance Delivery.**

(a) All citizens 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.

(b) NRCS traditionally provides conservation planning assistance on a request basis.

(1) Assistance is given on individual land units through conservation districts and tribal districts based on a mutual agreement and a cooperative working agreement. The mutual agreement establishes a partnership and a foundation for USDA agencies to cooperate with States, units of government, tribal governments, conservation districts, and tribal districts.

(2) The cooperative working agreement supplements the mutual agreement and establishes the relationship between the partners and agencies of USDA, and between State conservation agencies or tribal governments and conservation districts or tribal districts.

(3) NRCS may enter into agreements with other organizations and units of government to provide conservation planning assistance as mutually agreed upon. The State Conservationist will determine the level of NRCS assistance to be provided in areas without conservation districts. NRCS will provide assistance for programs mandated by Congress independent of a cooperative working agreement with the conservation district.

(c) NRCS has a "Trust" responsibility to deliver service to American Indian tribes through a government to government relationship. Law, policy, and other directives require government to government responsibilities.

(1) Executive memos direct Federal agencies to remove procedural impediments to working effectively with tribal governments in the delivery of programs and services, and to develop the best mechanism for delivering programs and services to tribes through the consultative process.

(2) A tribe may determine that a conservation district is not wanted or needed and that another mechanism fits their situation better.

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(3) The State Conservationist will consult with federally recognized tribes to determine the optimum means of delivering NRCS programs and services.

(4) Every effort will be made to fulfill NRCS' government to government responsibilities.

(d) In providing assistance, NRCS will comply with all applicable Federal, State, and local laws, program rules, policy statements, executive orders, and international agreements.

(e) Area wide conservation planning, especially for those situations with complex objectives, requires the use of interdisciplinary teams of specialists in the planning effort.

(f) In complex situations, NRCS will employ an early scoping process to determine expected needs for NRCS services and other resources before committing to planning assistance.

(g) Assistance on Federal or State land that will require a significant amount of NRCS resources beyond the required scoping process completed early in the planning process will be based on an agreement that provides for reimbursement of NRCS services. The State Conservationist will determine when an agreement is required.

**WA409.3 Requirements for Providing Conservation Planning Assistance.**

(a) All NRCS conservation planners will be certified. The COD will establish minimum criteria to be met by NRCS employees to be a "certified conservation planner" (See [GM-180, Part 409.9](#)). *WA-NRCS employees and partners must achieve and maintain certain conservation planning Job Approval Authority depending on their position, job description and duties.*

(1) A certified conservation planner is a person who possesses the necessary skill, training, and experience to implement the NRCS nine-step planning process to meet client objectives in solving natural resource problems.

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The certified conservation planner has demonstrated skill in assisting clients to identify resource problems, to express the client's objectives, to propose feasible solutions to resource problems, and leads the client to choose and implement an effective alternative that treats resource concerns and meets client's objectives.

(2) State Conservationists may establish additional certification levels and criteria as needed to cover degrees of scope and complexity in planning environments.

*(i) Awareness - Entry level employees who regularly assist planners and need to be aware of the NRCS planning process.*

*(ii) Apprentice - Engineers, Soil Scientists and any others who regularly assist other planners and land users with parts of the planning process will attain at least conservation planning Job Approval Authority Level 2.*

*(iii) Basic Planner - Employees below the GS-9 level, including, Soil Conservation Technicians, Soil Conservationists, Agronomists, Biologists, Range Management Specialists, Foresters, and others responsible for developing conservation plans must be certified at the Job Approval Authority Level 3 within 2 years of being assigned those duties.*

*(iv) Journey Planner - All GS 9 - 12 employees who have responsibilities to develop conservation plans as a component of their job description will attain Job Approval Authority Level 4 within 1 year of being assigned those duties. All journey planners who develop, review or approve conservation plans will stamp and sign each plan.*

*(v) Master Planner - Those employees who are assigned area or state-wide leadership in conservation planning training can acquire this Job Approval Authority Level. The State Conservationist may delegate Master Planner status to leadership positions.*

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*(vi) Maintenance of Competency Levels. Each employee is expected to avail themselves of opportunities for continuing education and self-development in conservation planning. Annual reviews between the employee and supervisor should document plan completions, current required Job Approval Authority Levels and the need for further training. For specific requirements of maintaining Job Approval Authority Levels, see WA 409.9, Minimum Criteria to Achieve an NRCS Certified Conservation Planner Designation for Level 4 (Journey Level Planner.)*

(b) All plans developed with the assistance of NRCS and partner employees will be approved by an NRCS or partner certified conservation planner. When a conservation plan is being used to meet specific USDA program requirements under the authority of NRCS, it must be approved by the appropriate NRCS official. For example Highly Erodible Land Compliance, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Wetland Restoration Program planning approval is a responsibility cannot be delegated. *A WA-NRCS journey or master planner, as described in WA 409.9 Minimum Criteria to Achieve an NRCS Certified Conservation Planner Designation, will approve all conservation plans developed with the assistance of NRCS and partner employees.*

(c) State Conservationists will establish and implement a process to ensure training is provided to employees. This is to include the following actions:

(1) Development of State training needs and budgets for conservation planning training.

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(2) The State Conservationist will develop a list of qualifications (knowledge, skills, and abilities) required for certified conservation planner designations in addition to the requirements listed in [GM-180, Part 409.9](#). These qualifications should include knowledge of the following fundamentals such as:

- (i) Crop production
- (ii) Grazing systems
- (iii) Plant growth
- (iv) Soil-water-plant relationships
- (v) Plant identification
- (vi) Nutrient uptake
- (vii) Erosion processes
- (viii) Water quality
- (ix) Proficiency in scientific tools and models
- (x) Animal production
- (xi) Conservation practices and systems common to the work area
- (xii) Wildlife management
- (xiii) State and local laws and regulations that may influence conservation planning.

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(3) Training must be provided through [NRCS training courses](#), on-the-job training or equivalent courses and methods approved by the State Conservationist as meeting the identified training need. Approval of equivalent courses will be done in consultation with the Director, National Employee Development Center. *All NRCS employees responsible for providing conservation planning assistance must complete a formal conservation planning course. The NRCS National Employee Development Center (NEDC) - Conservation Planning Course is the primary method of training and includes:*

*(i) Part 1 (Modules 1 - 5) provides the background and framework for conservation planning. The course is offered through the AgLearn website <http://www.aglearn.usda.gov/>. A description of the course is found at the following site: <http://www.nedc.nrcs.usda.gov/catalog/consplan.html>*

*(ii) Part 2 (Modules 6 - 8) is the hands-on field application of the planning process. This training is usually provided in a formal classroom setting along with field exercises. The session typically lasts 3-5 days and is taught by experienced conservation planners.*

*(iii) Part 3 (Module 9) is the individual preparation of a Conservation Plan using the information learned in Parts 1 and 2. Part 3 for a newer NRCS or partner employee, is a two step process: 1) development of a conservation plan with assistance from a coach and 2) independent development of a conservation plan for review. Each course participant assigned conservation planning responsibilities at the Job Approval Authority Level 3 or above (as described in Part 409.9, Minimum Criteria to Achieve an NRCS Certified Conservation Planner Designation) must independently complete a conservation plan and receive on-the-job-training (OJT) from a qualified coach or supervisor within 90 days of completing Part 2 of the Conservation Planning Course. All conservation plans developed by course participants will be reviewed and approved by a state specialist prior to certifying satisfactory completion of the Conservation Planning Course.*

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*(iv) Successful completion of all three parts of this course results in a Basic Planner Job Approval Authority Level 3 for Conservation Planning.*

The State Conservationist will ensure that all NRCS employees that approve conservation plans meet minimum NRCS certified conservation planner requirements.

*All WA-NRCS employees and partners who provide assistance for conservation planning, practice planning, practice design and practice application will have the appropriate training, qualifications and Job Approval Authority as described in WA409.9 Minimum Criteria to Achieve an NRCS Certified Conservation Planner Designation. This includes both engineering practices and ecological practices. It also includes the requirements of 409.10(a) through (j).*

(d) The State Conservationist will establish and maintain a list of NRCS certified conservation planners in the State consisting of NRCS employees, volunteers, and employees of Soil and Water Conservation Districts and State conservation agencies, that have requested to participate.

(e) State Conservationists may approve non-NRCS sources to certify conservation planners in accordance with procedures in the Conservation Programs Manual (CPM), Part 504. State Conservationists may also directly certify qualified individuals, such as third party vendors, as conservation planners contingent upon these individuals satisfying NRCS requirements. *Technical Service Providers (TSP) certification criteria are defined in the "TechReg" site found in the eFOTG (<http://techreg.usda.gov/>).*

Whether providing assistance to an approved source, or directly certifying a qualified individual, the State Conservationist will ensure that this assistance is consistent with existing NRCS policies and technical guides. As a minimum:

(1) State Conservationists are required to provide organizations that are interested in becoming approved sources with the minimum criteria that NRCS uses to certify conservation planners.

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(2) An NRCS approved source will maintain and make it accessible to the State Conservationist, an up-to-date list of the conservation planners it has certified.

**WA409.4 Planning on Units that Cross a State, County, or Field Office Boundary.**

(a) NRCS assistance on an individual land unit that crosses a State, county or field office boundary is the responsibility of the field office where the headquarters of the land unit is located, or as otherwise agreed upon by the client and respective State Conservationists. Conservation planning will be consistent with the FOTG covering the area where the land unit is located.

(b) For assistance to groups or units of government on a land unit that crosses a State boundary, the State Conservationists, in consultation with the client, will determine by mutual consent which State will have the lead responsibility for providing planning and other technical assistance.

**WA409.5 Documentation of Conservation Planning Data.**

Conservation planning data may be documented in hard copy, electronic format, or both, as appropriate. Agency approved software and software components will be used when the data is documented electronically.

**WA409.6 Conservation Planning Assistance that may have International Impacts.**

Assistance provided will be in compliance with National Instruction 280-301, International Conservation Assistance. State Conservationists will provide access to instructions for affected field offices as appropriate.

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**WA409.7 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) of 1966 and Privacy Act (PA) of 1974.**

NRCS policy and procedures on FOIA and PA are contained in National Instruction 120-310 and [GM-120, Part 408, Subpart C](#).

**WA409.8 Public Participation in the Planning Process.**

(a) Public participation is an integral part of the NRCS planning process, and is described in [GM-400, Part 400](#). Opportunities for public participation and involvement will be provided throughout the planning process to provide for a full partnership when working with groups (not acting as an individual), communities, and units of government. Individual conservation plans do not require public participation.

(b) Every area wide conservation planning effort will include a public participation component to the extent determined by the State Conservationist. Public participation activities are to be consistent with the requirements of applicable Federal statutes, Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations ([40 CFR Parts 1500-1508](#)), Civil Rights requirements and State statutes.

**WA409.9 Minimum Criteria to Achieve a NRCS Certified Conservation Planner Designation for Level 4 (Journey Level Planner.)**

(a) NRCS certified conservation planner candidates must complete all modules of the NRCS Conservation Planning Course or equivalent, before completing the field review ([See GM-180, paragraph 409.9\(d\)](#)). The State Conservationist, in consultation with the NRCS National Employee Development Center Director, will determine the equivalence of other training courses. The State Conservationist may provide the person a letter of waiver of this requirement, if the individual has previously demonstrated competence in RMS plan development.

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(b) Candidates must possess and demonstrate the following knowledge, skills, and abilities:

- (1) Awareness of the National Conservation Program.
- (2) Skill in applying the NRCS Conservation Planning Process.
- (3) Ability to plan and implement conservation practices common to the geographic area.
- (4) Knowledge of NRCS Field Office Technical Guide standards and specifications for applicable conservation practices in the State and locality.
- (5) Skill in applying approved erosion prediction technology (Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation and the Wind Erosion Equation).
- (6) Skill in using applicable site vulnerability assessment tools.
- (7) Knowledge of Federal, State, tribal, and local laws and regulations.

(c) Candidates must meet any additional minimum qualifications and criteria for conservation planning assistance established by the State Conservationist. *Job Approval Authorities are part of the overall NRCS process used to ensure both efficiency and quality during the planning, design and implementation of conservation plans and their associated practices. Job Approval Authorities are used to:*

- (1) Communicate the requirements for the certified conservation planner designation.*
- (2) Communicate the requirements for providers of conservation technical assistance associated with nutrient management planner, comprehensive nutrient management planner, pest management planner, and comprehensive nutrient management specialist.*
- (3) Assure that personnel resources are used efficiently by delegating Job Approval Authority at the local level.*

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*(4) Communicate to NRCS and non-NRCS personnel the extent of their technical authorities and their responsibilities associated with the planning, design and application of conservation plans and associated practices.*

*(5) Provide for implementation of conservation practices that, with proper operation and maintenance, will support resource management systems that perform their intended function for the appropriate life span of the practice.*

*(6) Assure that technical work complies with established practice standards, as well as applicable federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and codes.*

*(d) Job Approval Authorities are assessed and delegated by demonstrated ability. A person who is assessing an employee's Job Approval Authority Level will review products that the employee has produced and know the quality of the employee's work. Evidence that an employee has attended a training course is not necessarily a measure of their skill or ability. Approval authorities are developed for the following categories:*

*(1) Conservation planning.*

*(2) Ecological practices.*

*(3) Engineering practices.*

*(e) Demonstrated ability based on plan preparation, practice implementation or other basis must be re-authorized no less than once every 3 years.*

*(f) Job Approval Authority for conservation district employees will only be valid when work is conducted for NRCS and is subject to quality assurance reviews. Job Approval Authority for conservation district employees doing non-NRCS work will only be valid if quality assurance is specifically addressed by an agreement between NRCS and the conservation district.*

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*(g) The Job Approval Authority Level is based on the individual's training, experience and proven competence along with the level needed to complete assigned duties within the employee's specific work area.*

*(h) The current and required Job Approval Authority Levels of each employee will be annually reviewed and updated, as needed, by their supervisor.*

*(i) Execution of Job Approval Authority. The following guidelines will be used in determining Job Approval Authority Levels:*

*(1) Conservation Planning- There are five levels of approval authorities for conservation planning. To achieve any level, the employee must demonstrate their ability in all three phases (9 steps) of the planning process.*

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<i><b>JOB APPROVAL AUTHORITY LEVEL</b></i>	<i><b>DESCRIPTION</b></i>	<i><b>PLANNING LEVEL CRITERIA</b></i>
<i>1- Awareness</i>	<i>Needs training and experience to develop skills and abilities.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Must work with a planner with a Job Approval Authority of Level 3 or higher.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Must have completed Part 1 of the Conservation Planning Course (Modules 1- 5) and must have completed Introduction to the Field Office Technical Guide, Modules 1-5 available through AgLearn.</i></li> </ul>
<i>2-Apprentice</i>	<i>Works on parts of a conservation plan without responsibility for a whole product.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Develops and applies a product while working with a planner with a Job Approval Authority of Level 3 or higher.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Must have completed Introduction to the Field Office Technical Guide, Modules 1-5.</i></li> </ul>
<i>3-Basic Planner (certified)</i>	<i>Applies with review - Develops a conservation plan independently, but must have the product reviewed and signed by a Level 4 or 5 planner.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Must have completed Modules 1-9 of the Conservation Planning Course.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Annually must complete, with assistance, the entire planning process on at least 1 plan.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Must have Job Approval Authority for all practices in the plan or have concurrence from a person with appropriate Job Approval Authority.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Review of plan by planner with Level 4 or 5 Job Approval Authority will take place prior to submitting plan to landuser.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Reviewer will interview landuser/customer as part of determining if product is of acceptable quality.</i></li> </ul>

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APPROVAL AUTHORITY LEVEL	DESCRIPTION	PLANNING LEVEL CRITERIA
<p>4-Journey Planner (certified) stamp provided</p>	<p><i>Applies Independently - Empowered to develop and apply a conservation plan without review</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Must have completed Modules 1-9 of the Conservation Planning Course.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Annual Quality Assurance review results show acceptable work.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Must independently complete 2 plans or 1 plan and 1 conservation system guidesheet.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Must be able to demonstrate knowledge and skill of conservation planning process and be able to provide guidance and training to planners (Levels 1-3).</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Must have Job Approval Authority for all practices in the plan or have concurrence from a planner with appropriate Job Approval Authority.</i></li> </ul>
<p>5-Master Planner (certified)</p>	<p><i>Trains Others - Has demonstrated ability to train others in conservation planning. Has responsibility for one or more programs, systems and technical disciplines.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Must have completed Modules 1-9 of the Conservation Planning Course.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Annual Quality Assurance review results show acceptable work.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Must independently complete 2 plans or 1 plan and 1 conservation system guidesheet.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Must be able to demonstrate knowledge and skill of the conservation planning process and be able to provide guidance and training to planners (Levels 1-4).</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Must have Job Approval Authority for all practices in the plan or have concurrence from a planner with appropriate Job Approval Authority.</i></li> <li>• <i>Demonstrates group planning leader abilities and exemplifies the spirit of quality planning, which includes Coordinated Resource Management Planning, Area-wide planning, and watershed level planning.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Participates in conservation planning courses as an instructor and assists with developing state planning policies.</i></li> </ul>

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*(2) Engineering Practices. Refer to policy in 210-V-NEM, WA, and Exhibit C of this Part, Job Approval Authority for Engineering Practice Standards table.*

*(3) Conservation Practices - There are three categories of Job Approval Authorities for Practice Standards that will be used in Washington State. They are Practice Planning, Design, and Application. In addition, each NRCS practice is assigned one or more limiting factors. Limiting factors are items such as precipitation area, project size, slope or other factors that describe the scope of the practice. Job Approval Authorities are assigned based on the maximum scope for which an employee is qualified to work independently on each of the three components shown below. Limiting factors for Conservation Practices are shown in Exhibit B and Exhibit C.*

*(i) Practice planning - An individual with practice planning approval will have adequate knowledge, skills and abilities to independently plan conservation practice and resource management system alternatives. The individual must be able to plan practices or systems that will be technically, socially and economically feasible, meet the objectives of the landowner or decision maker and solve identified resource problems.*

*(ii) Design - An individual with design approval will have adequate knowledge, skills and abilities to independently design site-specific NRCS conservation practices including design drawings, specifications, job sheets and operation/maintenance requirements. The individual must be able to prepare complete designs and specifications that will meet NRCS standards and the objectives of the conservation plan.*

*(iii) Application - An individual with application approval will have adequate knowledge, skills and abilities to independently assist a producer with layout and installation of a practice and to certify the installed practice as meeting applicable NRCS standards. The individual must be able to determine if the completed practice is functional and installed according to site-specific practice specifications.*

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*(4) Formal assignment of Job Approval Authority to NRCS and partner personnel is documented on appropriate certification forms. Certification forms are available at Exhibit A - Conservation Planning Skills Certification (WA-MGT-9); Exhibit B - Job Approval Authority for Ecological Practice Standards table; and Exhibit C- Job Approval Authority for Engineering Practice Standards table.*

*(5) Delegation of authority for conservation planning, WA-MGT-9. Exhibit A.*

*(i) Supervisors will assign the required Job Approval Authority Levels on the "Conservation Planning Skills Certification" document, WA-MGT-9.*

*(ii) Planners who have a Job Approval Authority Level 4 or 5 will certify the Job Approval Authority Levels for others using the "Conservation Planning Skills Certification," WA-MGT-9.*

*(6) Delegation of Job Approval Authority for Engineering Practice Standards. See Exhibit C. (Page WA409-6(16), Engineering Practices, dated December 2004).*

*(7) Delegation of Job Approval Authority for Ecological Practice Standards. See Exhibit B (Page WA409-6(12), Ecological Practices Job Approval Authority Matrix, dated December 2004).*

*(Original delegation or a revision of the Job Approval Authority is initiated by a request from the employee with concurrence from their supervisor.)*

*(i) NRCS practice Job Authority Approval is only delegated or approved by authorized NRCS employees. Employees who are authorized to delegate or approve Job Approval Authority will receive written notification from the Area Conservationist, State Resource Conservationist or State Engineer. Authorized employees will typically be the area and state level technical discipline specialists, but can include other NRCS employees.*

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*(ii) The authorized employee completes the Delegation of Job Approval Authority for Ecological Practices Standards form (Exhibit (ii)) showing recommended approval limits, by class, for each of the three categories of technical assistance for each appropriate practice.*

*(iii) The recommending specialist shall sign and date the completed Job Approval Authority for Ecological Practice Standards form and submit to the employee's supervisor for concurrence. Discipline specialists will normally submit a separate Job Approval Authority for Ecological Practice Standards forms for practices within their discipline, but may combine multi-discipline recommendations on a single form when it is convenient.*

*(8) Job Approval Authorities and the Conservation Planning Skills Certification (WA-MGT-9) will be reviewed annually and updated as needed. Job approval authority will be down-graded or retracted if the employee does not demonstrate the required knowledge, skills, and abilities to maintain the previously delegated authority.*

*(9) Job Approval Authority, Employee Development, and Quality Assurance. The Job Approval Authority process should be used to increase efficiency in planning and application of conservation practices and resource management systems and in aiding in employee development. In order to provide adequate Job Approval Authority nearest to the work location, supervisors should match specific needs at the location with the job approval authorities of individuals located there.*

*(i) When a need for additional Job Approval Authority is identified, those needs should be identified on individual development plans and appropriate training should be requested and scheduled.*

*(ii) Quality assurance will be conducted in accordance with GM 450-WA Amendment WA13, Part 407 and be consistent with the State Quality Assurance Plan.*

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EXHIBIT A

WA-MGT-9

CONSERVATION PLANNING SKILLS CERTIFICATION

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ TITLE \_\_\_\_\_  
 GRADE \_\_\_\_\_

CONSERVATION PLANNING JOB APPROVAL AUTHORITY LEVEL \*  
 (Based on planning level criteria described in chart WA409.9(c)(1))

JOB APPROVAL AUTHORITY LEVEL	1 AWARENESS	2 APPRENTICE	3 BASIC PLANNER	4 JOURNEY PLANNER	5 MASTER PLANNER
REQUIRED					
CERTIFIED					

Supervised by: \_\_\_\_\_ Title \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Certified by: \_\_\_\_\_ Title \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*\*It is recognized and necessary to understand that individual conservation practices, resource management systems and conservation plans vary significantly from site to site. Therefore, varying amounts of training and experience to plan and apply the conservation practices and management systems specific to that site are required. Conservation planners shall adhere to the policy set forth in the USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service, General Manual 180-Part 409 - Conservation Planning Policy as amended by Washington State. Conservation planning policy requires that a demonstrated knowledge and skill level be obtained/maintained for each practice that will be planned in the Resource Management System. Job Approval Authorities and the Conservation Planning Skills Certification (WA-MGT-9) will be reviewed annually and updated as needed. Job approval authority will be down graded or retracted if the employee does not demonstrate the required knowledge, skills, and abilities to maintain the previously delegated authority.*

Certification review:

Job Approval Authority Level still appropriate: yes\_\_\_ no\_\_\_  
 Reviewer:\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_

Job Approval Authority Level still appropriate: yes\_\_\_ no\_\_\_  
 Reviewer:\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_

Job Approval Authority Level still appropriate: yes\_\_\_ no\_\_\_  
 Reviewer:\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_

COMMENTS:

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(j) Candidates must complete at least one field reviewed Resource Management System (RMS) plan for a conservation management unit (CMU).

(1) The planner will be accompanied to the field by the State Conservationist's designee to meet with the decision maker.

(2) The candidate will be expected to demonstrate competency in the planning process and plan development.

(3) The observer will evaluate the planner's involvement with the decision-maker (landowner or land operator) in the planning process and whether all resource concerns associated with the CMU are adequately addressed.

(4) Field reviewed plans must be approved by the State Conservationist or designee prior to final delivery to the decision maker.

(k) NRCS certified conservation planners are responsible for keeping their own individual development plan updated to reflect conservation planning training needed and completed to maintain or increase their skill level. Training to maintain and update conservation planning skills must, at a minimum, occur once every three years.

(1) The State Conservationist will determine the type and minimum hours of training necessary to maintain the certified conservation planner designation.

(2) Supervisors and certified conservation planners share the responsibility to identify and provide opportunities for employees to achieve needed maintenance or additional knowledge enhancement requirements.

(3) NRCS certified conservation planners are responsible for keeping their own records of training completed and providing the information to NRCS as evidence of meeting the minimum certification requirements.

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(l) The State Conservationist will address maintaining the certified conservation planner process and designation in the “State Quality Assurance Plan(s)”.

(1) Each certified conservation planner’s designation will be reviewed at least once every three years by the State Conservationist or designee.

(2) A sufficient number of conservation plans will be reviewed to determine that the conservation plans meet the NRCS planning policy and follow the procedures and guidelines listed in the NPPH.

(3) If an individual fails to meet the criteria for the certified conservation planner designation, the status will be revoked and the individual must be re-certified before providing conservation planning assistance.

(4) If multiple certified planner levels exist, an individual could become decertified at a higher designated level while retaining a lower certification level.

**WA409.10 Minimum Standards for Providers of Conservation Technical Assistance Associated with Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans.**

(a) A comprehensive nutrient management plan (CNMP) describes and documents a conservation system within a conservation plan that is unique to animal feeding operations.

(1) At a minimum, a CNMP must address quality criteria to the sustainable level for soil erosion and water quality for the planning unit associated with the animal feeding operation. Conservation planning activities associated with the development of a CNMP, however, should attempt to achieve a CNMP that addresses quality criteria to the RMS level for all five natural resources (soil, water, air, plants, and animals).

(2) Any CNMP that is developed by a NRCS or partner employee will have the plan approved by a NRCS certified conservation planner, as defined by GM-180, Part [409.3](#) or GM-180, Part [409.9](#).

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*In order to become a certified CNMP Specialist, employees must complete the following: 1) Conservation Planning Modules 1-5; 2) Introduction to the FOTG; 3) Agricultural Waste Management Systems, A Primer; 4) a five- day certification course; 5) an approved CNMP.*

(b) A CNMP may be comprised of six possible elements:

- (1) Manure and Wastewater Handling and Storage.
- (2) Land Treatment Practices.
- (3) Nutrient Management.
- (4) Record Keeping.
- (5) Feed Management.
- (6) Other Utilization Options.

(c) All of the elements, except Record Keeping, are technical in nature and require a certain level of acquired expertise to adequately address. To adequately address a specific element of a CNMP would require the planning and implementation of conservation practices that address the resource concerns identified for that specific element. An individual that has demonstrated a competency in planning and implementing conservation practices associated with one or more of the specific elements of a CNMP would qualify to be designated a "certified specialist."

(d) Record Keeping is a task completed solely by the owner and/or operator and is not an element that involves an approval by a certified specialist.

(e) The elements Feed Management and Other Utilization Options at present do not have NRCS conservation practice standards associated with their development and implementation. These elements are considerations in the planning process and do not require NRCS element certification. Should feed management become more than a consideration as a part of the CNMP, a qualified animal nutritionist should be used.

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(f) The State Conservationist will establish a certification program, or use a program established by a national organization, university, Cooperative State Research and Extension Service, State government, or other appropriately qualified entity, that provides for certified specialists associated with the core elements of a CNMP, such as the following:

- (1) Manure and Wastewater Handling and Storage.
- (2) Land Treatment Practices.
- (3) Nutrient Management.

(g) This paragraph establishes the minimum requirements associated with certification of individuals who will approve the development and/or design and implementation of elements of a CNMP. Any certification program must satisfy these requirements. Candidates for certification must also meet any additional qualifications and requirements established by the State Conservationist. The State Conservationist will ensure that all pertinent State certification and licensing requirements (e.g., engineering license, certified nutrient management specialist.) are met as a part of any program established.

(1) General Requirements. This subsection describes the general requirements that the State Conservationist must address in the approval of any certification program for “certified specialists”. The State Conservationist will determine how competency will be demonstrated or measured as part of the certification process for each of the following:

- (i) An awareness of the NRCS conservation planning process comparable to the information contained in the [NRCS Conservation Planning Course](#), Modules One to Five.
- (ii) An awareness of agricultural waste management systems equivalent to the information contained in the [NRCS Agricultural Waste Management System Training: A Primer Course](#)
- (iii) The contents and use of the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide as related to specific elements of the CNMP for which expertise is being provided.

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(iv) Criteria associated with the various elements of a CNMP as contained in the [NRCS Comprehensive Nutrient Management Planning Technical Guidance](#).

(v) Applicable local, State, tribal, and Federal laws and regulations that impact the elements of a CNMP.

(2) Requirements Specific to Elements of a CNMP. This subsection describes the requirements specific to certain elements of a CNMP. As a part of the certification process, the State Conservationist will determine how competency will be demonstrated or measured for the following elements:

(i) Manure and Wastewater Handling and Storage. This element addresses the components and activities associated with the production facility, feedlot, manure and wastewater storage and treatment structures and areas, and any areas or mechanisms used to facilitate transfer of manure and wastewater. The following are required:

(A) Knowledge adequate to design and implement conservation practices typically used to address this element of a CNMP. The State Conservationist will need to identify the conservation practices typically used in the State to address this element.

(B) Working knowledge of the information contained in the NRCS Agricultural Waste Management Systems Level 2 Course, or equivalent.

(ii) Land Treatment Practices. This element addresses the land on which manure and wastewater from an animal feeding operations will be applied. The following knowledge and skills are required:

(A) Skill in applying soil loss and/or wind erosion prediction tools, as appropriate.

(B) Skill in using site vulnerability assessment tools. Acceptable site vulnerability assessment tools allowable for use in a State will be specifically identified as part of that State's certification process.

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(C) Knowledge of the NRCS conservation planning process.

(D) Knowledge adequate to design and implement conservation practices common to the geographic area.

(iii) Nutrient Management. This element addresses the requirements for land application of all nutrients and organic by-products (e.g., animal manure, commercial fertilizers, crop residues, legume credits, and irrigation water) that must be evaluated and documented for each Conservation Management Unit. The following knowledge, skills, and abilities are required:

(A) Working knowledge of the information contained in the NRCS Introduction to Water Quality Course, or equivalent.

(B) Skill in using nutrient risk assessment tools. Acceptable risk assessment tools allowed for use in a State will be identified as part of that State's certification process.

(C) Working knowledge of the information in the NRCS Nutrient and Pest Management Considerations in Conservation Planning Course

(D) Skill in developing a plan to address the nutrient management conservation practice in compliance with the NRCS Nutrient Management (FOTG Practice Code 590), and, as appropriate, Irrigation Water Management (FOTG Practice Code 449) conservation practice standard(s).

(h) Training.

(1) Training must be provided through NRCS training courses, on-the-job training, or equivalent courses and methods approved by the State Conservationist as meeting the identified training requirement. The State Conservationist, in consultation with the Director, National Employee Development Center will grant approval for course equivalency in lieu of an NRCS formal training course.

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(i) Maintaining Certifications.

(1) Certified specialists are responsible for keeping and completing updating of their own individual development plan to reflect training needed and to maintain or increase their skill level. Training to maintain and update skills must, at a minimum, occur once every three years. The State Conservationist will determine the type and minimum hours of training necessary to maintain the certified specialist designation.

(j) Quality Assurance.

(1) The State Conservationist will address maintaining certified specialist certification programs in their “State Quality Assurance Plan.” The State Conservationist or designee will review each certified specialist designation, at least once every three years. A sufficient number of plans and/or design reviews will be completed to determine whether the plans and/or designs developed and implemented will meet NRCS conservation practice standards and policy, and the intent of the Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan Technical Guidance. If an individual fails to meet the qualifications or criteria established for a certified specialist designation the status will be revoked by the certifying organization, and the individual must re-certify

(k) Certified Specialists.

(1) NRCS will maintain a list of certified specialists certified by NRCS. Each NRCS-approved source of a certification program for third parties will maintain a current list of specialists certified by that program and will make it available to the State Conservationist.

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**WA409.11 Minimum Standards for Providers of Conservation Technical Assistance Associated with Conservation Planning that includes Pest Management.**

- (a) NRCS roles in pest management are:
  - (1) Evaluating environmental risks associated with probable pest management recommendations.
  - (2) Developing appropriate mitigation alternatives to minimize environmental risks.
  - (3) Assisting clients to adopt Integrated Pest Management (IPM) that helps protect natural resources.
  - (4) Assisting clients to develop and implement an acceptable pest management component of their overall conservation plan.
  
- (b) The State Conservationist must ensure that all NRCS personnel who provide technical assistance for pest management are properly trained and meet applicable requirements for their positions as well as State or local licensing and/or certification requirements. In addition, the State Conservationist must establish a process to provide continuing education to maintain employee competency.
  
- (c) Although certification is not required to develop or revise pest management components of conservation plans, all persons who approve pest management components of conservation plans must be certified specialists in pest management. A certified conservation planner as required by [GM-180, Paragraph 409.3\(b\)](#) will approve the overall conservation plan.

*In order to approve pest management plans in Washington State, employees must: 1) Complete the prerequisites in the National Policy; 2) Complete the course, "Pest Management Considerations in Conservation Planning," including prerequisites; and 3) Complete an approved pest management plan. After initial certification, at least one pest management plan per year is required.*

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(d) The State Conservationist must establish a program to certify specialists who approve pest management components of conservation plans, including:

- (1) NRCS employees
- (2) Volunteers
- (3) Employees of Soil and Water Conservation Districts and State Conservation agencies that have requested to participate.

(e) The State Conservationist may establish a program to certify third party vendors and other private sector individuals such as certified crop advisors and crop consultants. Existing programs from national certifying organizations, land grant universities, Cooperative State Research Education, and Extension Service, State government agencies and other appropriately qualified entities may be utilized as components of the NRCS certification program in a State.

(f) In addition, the State Conservationist must establish a process to provide continuing education to maintain certification for all specialists who approve pest management components of conservation plans.

(g) The State Conservationist must address the following in establishing a program for certifying specialists who approve pest management components of conservation plans:

- (1) An understanding of the conservation planning process.
- (2) An understanding of the production systems where pest management will be applied.
- (3) An understanding of local, State, and Federal laws and regulations related to pest management.
- (4) An understanding of natural resource concerns related to pest management activities.
- (5) An awareness of the content of NRCS pest management policy.
- (6) An understanding of the content and use of the NRCS FOTG.
- (7) Proficiency in applying the NRCS pest management standard ([FOTG Practice Code 595](#)).

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(h) For items 1 through 7 listed above, the State Conservationist must determine how competency will be demonstrated. The following are minimum requirements:

- (1) Successful completion of [“NRCS Conservation Planning Modules One through Five”](#) or equivalent.
- (2) Successful completion of the [“NRCS Introduction to Water Quality Course”](#) or equivalent.
- (3) Successful completion of the pest management track of the NRCS [“Nutrient and Pest Management Considerations in Conservation Planning”](#) course or equivalent.
- (4) Demonstrated skill in using the Windows Pesticide Screening Tool (WIN-PST) and/or other appropriate pest management environmental risk screening tools.
- (5) Demonstrated skill in developing the pest management component of a conservation plan based on the State Pest Management [\(FOTG Practice Code 595\)](#) conservation practice standard.