

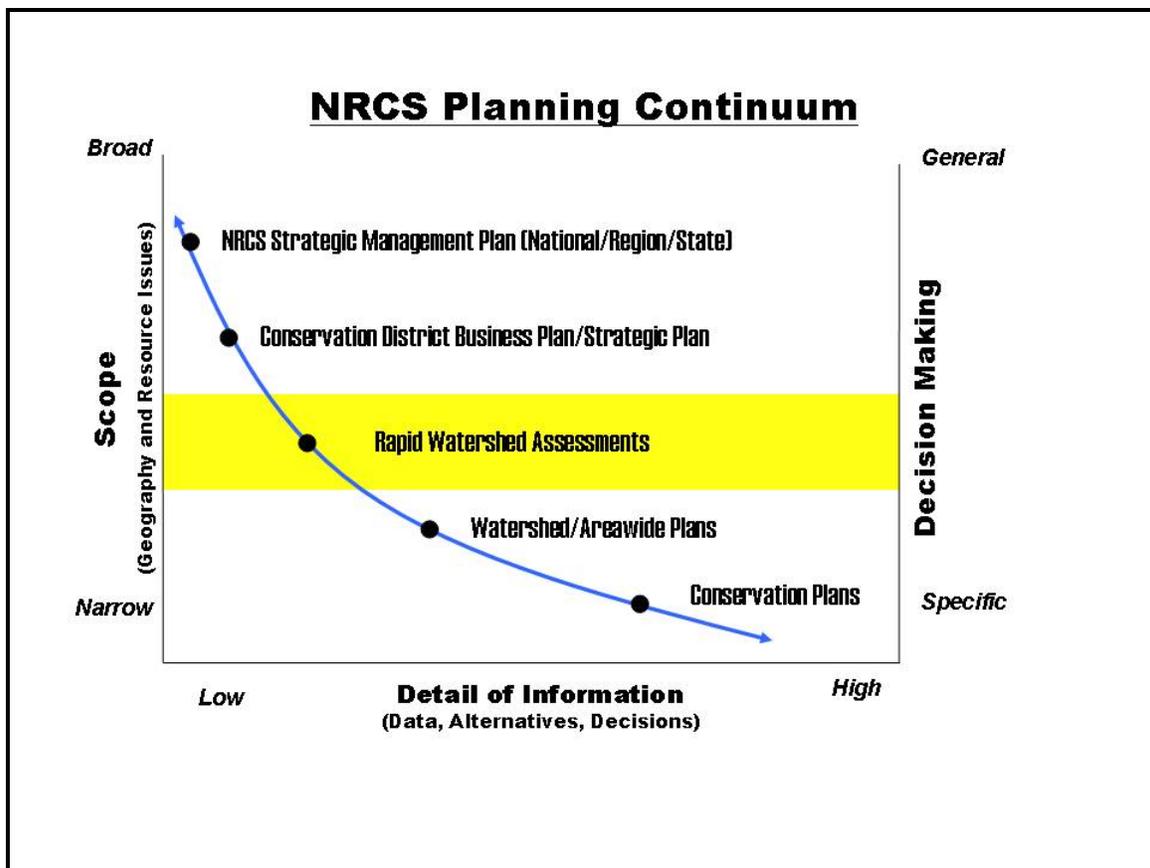
NRCS Rapid Watershed Assessment Guidance

Subpart A – Background and Purpose

Introduction

A. Background Information

- (1) Rapid watershed assessments provide initial estimates of where conservation investments would best address the concerns of landowners, conservation districts, and other community organizations and stakeholders. These assessments help landowners and local leaders set priorities and determine the best actions to achieve their goals.
- (2) Rapid watershed assessments are summaries of resource concerns and opportunities that are extremely useful for a number of activities. Examples include serving as a platform for Farm Bill program delivery, to provide useful information that can feed back into Conservation District business plans, or to provide a foundation for watershed or area wide planning. The diagram below shows rapid watershed assessments in relation to other plans and assessments.

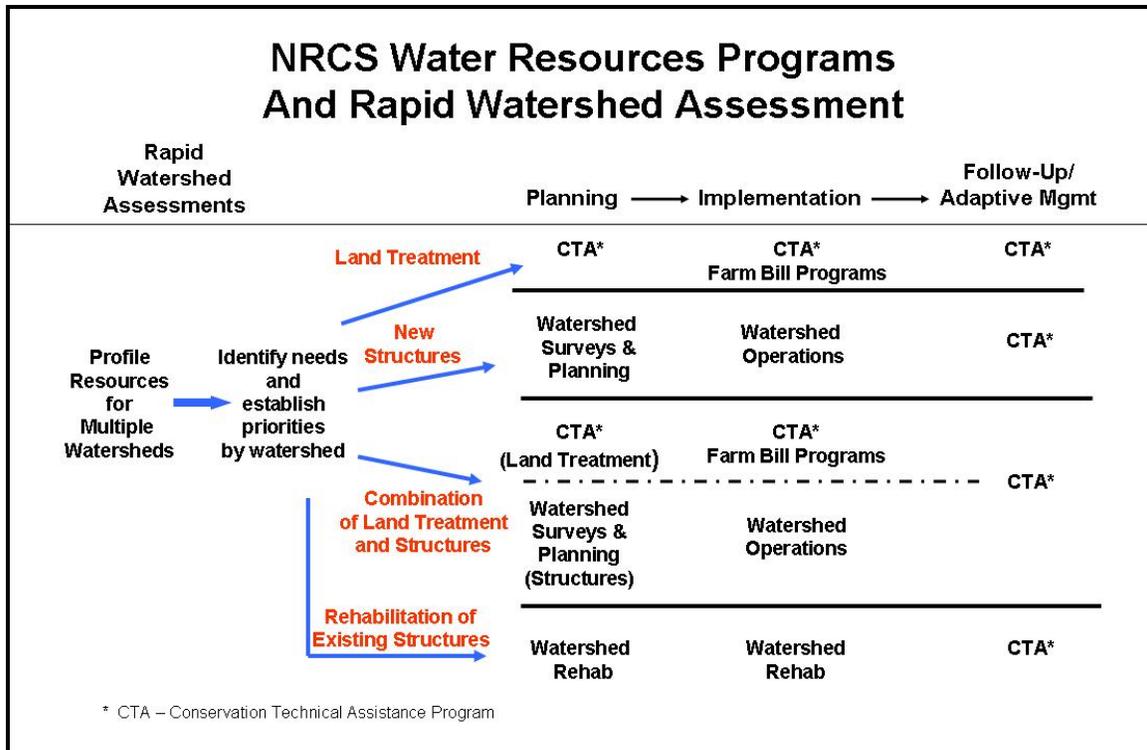


- (3) Rapid watershed assessments are the product of a process which evaluates resource conditions and needs on an 8-digit hydrologic unit basis. Following are descriptions of the major steps and products in this process.

B. Rapid Watershed Assessments

(Interim Guidance, December 21, 2005)

- (1) The assessments involve the collection of quantitative and qualitative information to develop a watershed profile, sufficient analysis of that information to make qualitative statements as to resource concerns and conditions, and the generation of information with which to make decisions about conservation needs and recommendations. These assessments are conducted through the use of Geographic Information System (GIS) technology and by conservation planning teams working in each watershed, meeting with landowners and conservation groups, inventorying agricultural areas, assessing current levels of resource management, identifying conservation recommendations, and, making qualitative estimates of the impacts of conservation on local resource concerns.
- (2) The rapid watershed assessment should identify the primary resource concerns for the watershed and develop a matrix to summarize the following:
 - (i) Current resource conditions and operation and maintenance costs,
 - (ii) Desired resource conditions,
 - (iii) Conservation practice and system recommendations and operation and maintenance costs,
 - (iv) Qualitative effects on primary resource concerns, and
 - (v) Potential funding sources for implementation.
- (3) It should be noted that this level of assessment only itemizes costs for on-farm conservation and not for accompanying infrastructure changes that may also be needed, such as new irrigation delivery systems, flood protection, extensive structural stream restoration, etc. Infrastructure changes usually require a more in-depth analysis than permitted in rapid watershed assessment. The need for infrastructure changes should be acknowledged if identified during the assessment process. The following diagram attempts to clarify the relationship between rapid watershed assessment, Farm Bill program implementation, and PL-566 Watershed Planning. It is a matrix which attempts to describe the various paths conservation activities could follow from planning to implementation, followed up with implementation with an emphasis on the anticipated sources of funding used for each step.



- (4) Rapid watershed assessments are limited in the details they provide due to the restricted data collection associated with the process. For example, they:
- (i) Do not address cumulative effects
 - (ii) Do not address infrastructure needs
 - (iii) Tend to be qualitative, not quantitative in nature
- (5) As mentioned above, in order to bolster the quantitative nature of the data with regard to cumulative effects or infrastructure needs at the watershed level, further planning activity would be required through a locally-led watershed or areawide planning process. The process anticipated for use at this point would be PL-566 watershed planning or areawide planning, and would be entered into when the rapid watershed assessment identifies the need for either structural or potentially controversial solutions to resource problems. In these instances, the more extensive planning process would be used to collect much more detailed information related to the specific effects of the proposed actions.

C. Benefits of these Activities

While these rapid assessments provide less detail and analysis than NRCS' Watershed Surveys and Planning program, they can:

- (i) Provide quick and inexpensive sources of information on which to base decisions about conservation priorities, allocation of resources, funding for implementation, and how to report outcomes/results
- (ii) Provide a level of detail that is sufficient for identifying some actions that can be taken without waiting on further watershed-level studies or analyses
- (iii) Provide a preliminary source of information for standard Environmental Evaluation¹ or more in-depth Environmental Assessment². Proposed

¹ An Environmental Evaluation is the part of conservation planning which inventories and estimates the potential effects on the human environment of alternative solutions to resource problems.

² An Environmental Assessment is a concise public document, for which the Federal agency is responsible,

- conservation actions may require Federal or State permits or further ESA or NEPA analysis, as determined by the standard Environmental Evaluation
- (iv) Identify where further detailed analyses or watershed studies are needed
 - (v) Identify if there are infrastructure needs
 - (vi) Address multiple objectives and concerns of landowners and communities
 - (vii) Enhance established partnerships at the local and state levels
 - (viii) Enable landowners and communities to decide on the best mix of NRCS programs and other funding sources to meet their resource concerns
 - (ix) Evaluate a full array of conservation program tools (i.e. cost-share practices, easements, technical assistance).

D. Anticipated Uses of Rapid Watershed Assessments

- (1) The rapid watershed assessments are intended to:
 - (i) Report benchmark conditions,
 - (ii) Identify conservation opportunities and costs,
 - (iii) Evaluate conservation implementation activities,
 - (iv) Estimate the effects of implementing conservation systems and practices,
 - (v) Provide information upon which Conservation Districts and NRCS can develop business plans and strategies, or areawide plans, to resolve resource concerns in their watershed,
 - (vi) Assist Conservation Districts and other agricultural groups and individuals obtain technical and financial assistance to implement conservation, and
 - (vii) Assist Conservation Districts, agencies, organizations, farmers and ranchers form effective partnerships to improve resource conditions.
- (2) Because of various procedural and scientific limitations, the rapid watershed assessments cannot be used to:
 - (i) Establish water allocations,
 - (ii) Set requirements for meeting water quality standards,
 - (iii) Establish rules for satisfying the Endangered Species Act,
 - (iv) Estimate flow changes at any location, or
 - (v) Monitor conservation implementation progress (this is dependent on the availability of private, state and federal funding in future years).
- (3) While rapid watershed assessments are not sufficiently rigorous to guide the above actions, they should be capable of identifying the need for in-depth analysis related to these types of problems. In addition, they should be of sufficient quality to provide a foundation for the more thorough assessment and planning that needs to be done.
- (4) Examples of how rapid watershed assessments can be used by NRCS, Conservation Districts, and other partners include:
 - (i) Deciding how to best allocate and prioritize available financial and technical assistance, as well as how to acquire additional financial and technical assistance to achieve agriculture's greatest potential for addressing the resource concerns in a watershed.
 - (ii) Using the information provided to demonstrate how working together to develop conservation actions would be beneficial to the agricultural community and other stakeholders; and to resolving resource issues in the watershed.
 - (iii) Providing qualitative, and sometimes quantitative, estimates of agriculture's contribution to resolving resource concerns such as reducing individual on-farm

that briefly provides sufficient evidence and analysis for determining whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact for proposed actions.

water demand, improving water quality, reducing soil erosion, enhancing fish and wildlife habitat, etc.