

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnerships, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics

USDA Natural
Resources
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Team

Using a Multidisciplinary Approach to Conduct a Situational Analysis

As a conservation planner, do you have a clear and detailed understanding of the social and natural resource processes operating in a geographic area or with a particular group of producers? If not, you may want to conduct a situational analysis.

By conducting a situational analysis, conservation planners can discover needs and problems facing stakeholders. Determining the myriad of factors facing stakeholders allows you to customize the conservation planning process. This fact sheet will help you assess the internal and external factors that influence conservation activities, while meeting the goals of the producers and the community. A case study containing an NRCS situation appears at the end of the general description.

What is a Situational Analysis?

A situational analysis is a systematic method of collecting, analyzing, and delivering information about current resource conditions, issues, problems, opportunities, and challenges facing stakeholders within a defined geographic area (e.g. farming community, county, watershed, multi-county) or an area of common interest (e.g. crop farmers, dairy producers, absentee land owners). A situational analysis carefully



assesses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) influencing the socioeconomic and biophysical resource conditions in a situation. This type of analysis can describe the major issues, problems, and needs facing stakeholders in planning and implementing conservation activities. By simultaneously assessing external and internal factors in a multitude of areas (e.g. government policies, politics, environment, health, economics, technology, climate, and natural resource factors), NRCS and its conservation partners can better plan for future conservation activities and programs.

A situational analysis can be specific or broad based in its focus and purpose. It can be directed toward a specific resource issue or several resource issues, one geographic location or several locations, one stakeholder group or several stakeholder groups, or a narrowly defined or expanded time period. The data used to describe current conditions can be generated from a variety of natural resource and social data sources. Since this fact sheet assumes NRCS conservation planners are more familiar with natural resource data than social information, this publication focuses more on the process of collecting and analyzing social data.

Social data is divided into primary and secondary sources. Primary social data is typically described as “first hand” data that includes information gathered through field interviews, focus groups, surveys, public meetings, and group meetings. Secondary data is information that has been collected previously through the census, research reports, meeting minutes, and newspaper articles. Either type of data may contain qualitative (non-numeric) and quantitative (numeric) data.

A multidisciplinary team gathers natural resource and social data and intertwines the information through a dynamic framework. A situational analysis will typically result in an assessment of the current situation, an outline of recommendations, a list of potential activities, and a communication plan. The composite of these actions will utilize knowledge from a variety of social science and natural resource scientific disciplines. This team-based approach is especially useful when the natural resource problems and issues are complex, caused by humans, related to human or animal health, and/or have major economic consequences on producers or the community.

Who Benefits from the Information?

Any member of the conservation partnership, particularly field staff and program managers, who have an interest in obtaining more detailed information about a situation. Detailed information about a situation will include an assessment of internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats.

Why is a Situational Analysis Important?

The advantages of a situational analysis include:

- Provides a method to simultaneously assess physical and social resource concerns
- Provides a method to assess the issues, problems, and concerns of a specific group
- Structures the collection of data
- Examines both internal and external factors that impact a situation
- Gathers information on a wide range of issues from interested stakeholders
- Develops a communication plan to deliver the findings to a large and diverse audience

The disadvantages of a situational analysis include:

- Time consuming
- Bias can be introduced into summaries and findings from personal interviews
- Changes in program priorities and/or the public’s interest in a project may hinder the project’s implementation.
- A poorly designed communication plan can result in the ineffective delivery of messages to identified stakeholder groups.



How do You Conduct a Situational Analysis?

The steps involved in conducting a situational analysis are:

1. Identify the situation using physical, planning, and social boundaries.

A GIS (Geographic Information System) can be used to define physical boundaries such as county lines and watershed boundaries. A situation can also be defined by planning boundaries which can include local, environmental, economic, and advocacy interest groups. Absentee landowners, dairy farmers, soy bean growers, and poultry producers are groups whose common social boundaries create a common interest.

2. Meet with interested individuals, such as the local work group, the state technical committee, etc. to discuss the conservation concerns and issues.

For specific information on how to identify interested individuals see:

Developing and Maintaining a Network

http://www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/publications/1_PPCs/PPC020_Networks.pdf

Conservation Partnerships: Indicators of Success

http://www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/publications/2_Tech_Reports/T004_indicator_final.pdf

Understanding Community Power Structures

http://www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/publications/1_PPCs/PPC021_CommunityPower.pdf

Working with Community Leaders

http://www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/publications/1_PPCs/PPC043_WorkingWithCommunityLeadersFinal.pdf

Defining Communities: An Issue Based Approach

http://www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/publications/1_PPCs/PPC022_FDDEfiningCommunitiesAnIssueBasedApproach.pdf

Developing Your Skills to Involve Communities in Implementing Locally Led Conservation

Contact your State Social Sciences Coordinator or the SSI-GR office to obtain the modules “Community Issues Identification,” “Addressing Community Issues,” and “Networks and Collaborations.” http://www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/publications/5_Brochures/PB003_LocallyLed.pdf

3. Form a situational assessment team from a list of stakeholders, individuals, and groups, with an interest in the conservation issues.

A major goal is to ensure that all views are represented. This team can include representatives from common interest groups (dairy farmers) and opposition groups (local dairy association) that have been identified from newspaper articles, reports, etc. Technical specialists, such as nutrient management specialists, can also be part of the team. Methods used to develop team membership include personnel assignments by agency managers, volunteers, and/or invitations by work group or technical committee. This invitation should included representatives from the public and private sectors.

- 4. Gather information from secondary or existing sources to describe physical and social resource conditions.** Box 1 contains a list of resource issues to consider when conducting a situational analysis.

Box 1

Physical Resources

- Air/Atmosphere
- Climate
- Water (quantity and quality)
- Soils
- Plants/Vegetation
- Wildlife
- Domestic Animals

Overlap of Physical Resources and Social-Economic Resources

- Land-use
- Traditional production patterns
- Agricultural infrastructure, e.g. seed and fertilizer/chemical dealers
- Permanent demonstration sites
- Land values

Social-Economic Resources

- Population Characteristics
- Education
- Cultural Characteristics, e.g. ethnicity and religious affiliation
- Primary occupation
- Income Level
- Level of community trust ¹
- Interest rates

Perceived barriers to adoption within or outside the situation, that may impact conservation activities, such as attitudes, motivation, and other individual and group behavioral elements

¹ The Social Sciences Team has a procedure that measures the level of community trust. Trust is related to the social bonds people form when interacting in everyday life, e.g. conservation clubs, farmer-to-farmer networks, etc. For more detailed information, see the Technical Report, "Adding Up Social Capital: An Investment in Communities"

- 5. Gather information from primary data sources.** Be objective when gathering primary information from residents, farmers, officials, etc. by ensuring that your questions are not "loaded." For example, you might ask, "What do you think of the cost of Program X? In contrast, avoid biased items and terms; such as, "Don't you think that program X has too many hidden costs?"

Examine the existing data and first hand information using the following questions as a guide:

- What legislation is currently impacting producers within the area?
- Has the cost-share level changed over the past 3 years?
- Have producers in the area adopted innovative agricultural technologies?
- Who are NRCS's existing partners?
- What resources are available to address the identified concerns within the situation, e.g. field staff, money, in-kind services, and others?
- What are the most pressing issues, problems, and needs facing the conservation community?
- What strengths and/or resources are available within the defined area to address issues, problems, and needs?
- What challenges or barriers prevent NRCS, producers, and other conservation partners from addressing the issues and problems?
- How can NRCS directly impact the issues and problems through technical assistance, financial assistance, information and education, and/or requests for policy or program changes?

- 6. Assign roles and responsibilities relative to the collection of information.**

Technical experts representing the disciplines of economics, soils, hydrology, and nutrient management can be requested to collect data. Sociologists can be assigned to collect primary data using methods such as focus groups and field interviews. Relevant newspaper articles can be obtained from the NRCS State Public Affairs Specialist. Volunteers can collect information via an electronic or library search.

7. Brainstorm and organize the findings from your workgroup discussions.

Use the format below.

Internal

Strengths	Weaknesses

External

Opportunities	Threats

8. Prioritize natural resource concerns and issues.

Focus on three to five conservation concerns. One social science method that is available to assist in prioritizing issues is the “Paired Comparison” technique. For more in-depth information, go to “Prioritizing Issues or Concerns: Using the Paired Comparison Technique” at http://www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/publications/1_PPCs/PPC011_PrioritizingPairedComparsionFinal.pdf.

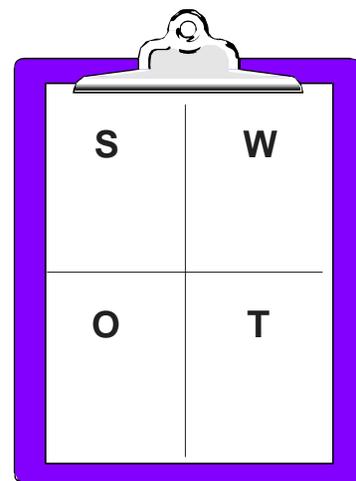
9. Formulate a list of future actions resulting from the analysis.

10. Develop a communication plan.

Determine how the report will be presented and distributed to all internal and external stakeholders. For more information see the draft PPC on “How to Develop a Marketing Plan” or “Marketing for Success” at http://www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/publications/3_Marketing/M001_GuideBooksMarketingConservationSuccess.doc.

Present information by using categories such as:

- Physical resources
- Socio-economic resources
- Primary data/Interest group analysis
- Attitudes toward situation
- Perceived barriers to problem within the situation
- Suggested solutions



How Can You Use This Information Within NRCS?

An example of a situational analysis in NRCS appears below. This example is based on an actual project. The XYZ Headwaters Water Quality Project took place on the eastern seaboard of the United States. It encompassed five counties, approximately 1.8 million acres, and 22 hydrologic unit areas. Agriculture is the primary industry and within agriculture the poultry and livestock sectors are the economic leaders. NRCS National Headquarters staff became aware of high levels of fecal bacteria through articles in local newspapers and requested that the NRCS state staff initiate a detailed study of the situation.

To better understand what poultry and livestock producers thought about the newspaper reports concerning fecal coliform and the need to address the complexity of issues related to animal waste management, NRCS state staff requested the assistance of the local work group in initiating the formation of a situational analysis team. Technical representatives from a number of knowledgeable agencies and organizations with a stake in the situation were included on the team. Some of these groups included the state soil conservation agency, the Headwaters Soil Conservation District, poultry association, The Water Quality Advisory Committee, and NRCS. The team members included experts in the areas of agronomy, nutrient management, economics, sociology, engineering, and biology. The team identified four major concerns: water quality, animal waste storage, nutrient management, and fecal bacteria. From the work session, a team of technical and district representatives created a list of internal strengths and weaknesses along with external opportunities and threats. Their lists are tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Strengths	Weaknesses
Locally driven Fully funded- financial and technical assistance Availability of technical assistance from agency staff Educational assistance – tours and demonstrations Existing partnerships at the state and local level Voluntary producer participation in programs Availability of multidisciplinary technical assistance (nutrient management specialist, hydrologist, economist, etc.) Regulatory backup Available USDA Farm Bill Programs EQIP Water Quality Special Project Nutrient Management Initiative USDA Water Quality Initiative	Failure to treat inventoried needs in the watershed Limited field staff Limited farmer education program on composting Limited information on phosphorus index Limited number of conservation plans including nutrient management Low number of certified Nutrient Management Planners Lack of a waste transport plan Limited litter and manure storage structures Difficult to relocate livestock to new feeding areas

The team also identified a list of stakeholders, or those who would be impacted by the project. The stakeholders were:

- USDA agencies - NRCS, Farm Services agency, and Cooperative Extension
- Other federal agencies – Environmental Protection Agency and Fish and Wildlife Service
- State Soil Conservation Agency
- XYZ Soil Conservation District
- Environmental groups
- Poultry Association
- State Department of Agriculture
- State Department of Environmental Protection – Office of Water Resources

Table 2

Opportunities	Threats
Improve nutrient management Improve existing partnerships Support of project objectives by the district and state agricultural agency Cost-share support from project sponsors Historical successes in watershed (Water Quality Incentive Program) Ongoing PL-534 Land Treatment Project Section 319 Nonpoint Source Project Potential for waste transport program	Limited knowledge and understanding of watershed resources Public opposed to existing amounts of fecal bacteria Pending legislation Lack of information on safe phosphorus levels Improperly stored and utilized litter and manure

From secondary data sources, the team collected information on the physical and socio-economic characteristics of the area. This information was gathered through sources such as the U.S. Census of Agriculture and NRCS Technical Reports. Socio-economic data can be found using the U.S. Census of Population and Housing (<http://www.census.gov/population/www/index.html>) and U.S. Census QuickFacts (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/>).

The team also collected data from primary sources. A survey was used to inventory people in the watershed. Producers were interviewed about the number of dead bird composters in the hydrologic unit, number of minority farmers, and number of conservation plans. In addition, issues raised in ongoing local work group meetings served as a source of primary data on the watershed.

Following the collection and analysis of primary and secondary information, the team created the following list of actions to address the problems of the watershed:

- Increase awareness, understanding, and use of Phosphorous index in nutrient management planning
- Work with RC&D to develop waste transport projects
- Introduce a farmer education program – tours and demonstrations
- Implement a dead bird composting program
- Increased federal and state cost-sharing opportunities
- Update litter and manure storage structures
- Relocate livestock feeding areas
- Promote the installation of conservation buffers
- Increase the number of conservation plans including nutrient management
- Develop a research project to study phosphorous levels in soil
- Increase the number of certified Nutrient Management Planners
- Address inventoried treatment needs by watershed sub basins
- Use 10 year contracts to manage livestock waste and poultry litter

After the data collection and situational analysis were complete, the team developed a comprehensive report. The report contained a section which underscored the role that NRCS played in bringing all stakeholders together to address both the social concerns and physical resource issues. The local work group reviewed the initial draft for technical adequacy and distributed the final reports that included an executive summary, to the stakeholders cited above and used informational meetings to present the results. The report was available in print and/or electronically. Findings were also distributed at local, state, and national conferences.

A situational analysis is important to understanding the current resource conditions within a defined area. Knowing the advantages and disadvantages of a situational analysis can assist us in determining the appropriateness of this method to a particular project. A step-by-step process in conducting a situational analysis can aid in project organization, add to the creditability of NRCS, and provide clarity of identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. In addition, it can provide a basis on which specific strategies can be planned and implemented. Without a situational analysis, studies may be incomplete. Too much or too little emphasis can be given to physical resource concerns versus socio-cultural factors.

Where can I find more Information?

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