

**FTS-USDA OFFICE OF COMMUNICATION**

**Moderator: Sylvia Rainford  
December 13, 2011  
1:00 pm CT**

Rod Bain: (Unintelligible) day and welcome to today's live broadcast from the USDA Radio Studios in Washington DC, featuring the chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Dave White.

Reporters, if you wish to ask Chief White a question -- or any of his guests -- after opening remarks, please press star 1 on your telephone touchtone pad.

It's now my pleasure to introduce NRCS chief Dave White.

Dave White: Thanks Rod. And greetings, everyone.

I really appreciate you calling in today. With me is Dr. Wayne Honeycutt -- he's the deputy chief of all the science and technology in the Natural Resources Conservation Service -- and John Russell Davis, who is our top nutrient management specialist.

As you know, today we issued the revised nutrient management standard. NRCS uses this standard to help producers manage the application of nutrients on agricultural land -- particularly of concern nitrogen and phosphorous.

And when I say nutrients, I mean nutrients writ large. It includes commercial fertilizers, animal manures, legumes, cover crops. All NRCS standards are updated every four to five years to keep them current with science and technology and the update of this nutrient standard is part of that routine process.

The last update of this standard occurred in 2006. Now that said, out of the - oh, 100 or 60-so conservation practice standards that NRCS maintains, this one by far engenders the most controversy and interest.

I suppose other folks are going to make their own value judgments on this, but we believe we have achieved a scientifically credible approach that will result in real environmental protection while maintaining that flexibility that a producer needs to stay in business.

A key point I'd like to make here before I delve into the guts of this is that NRCS is not a regulatory agency and we only operate voluntary programs. So if a farmer or rancher wants to produce in a program like the Environmental Quality Incentives program, this is the standard we will follow.

Now, however, we also recognize that because of the science that underpins all our standards, we know that there are regulatory agencies who adopt our standards or some version of them for their own purposes and we're very cognizant of that.

At - when the news release came out at one o'clock, we also made these - the written text of the standard and the associated support documents available on our homepage. That URL is NRCS dot USDA dot GOV.

And the first thing you'll see when you hit that home page - there's two guys on a red pickup truck. And when I last checked, we didn't have a title up there yet. But if you'll - if you'll click the link it'll take you right to where the standards are and you can download them or do whatever you want with them.

So basically, let me get started here. NRCS really works with - will use this to help producers plan and implement better nutrient management practices. You will find that we have a very much-increased emphasis on the four R's.

And the four R's are really the fertilizer industry's standard. And basically what that means is the right amount, that we're using the right source, putting it in the right place at the right time.

If we can get those four R's right, we will have gone a tremendous way towards really maximizing the efficiency of our fertilizer, helping protect the environment and saving producers money.

We had, like, five goals for this. We want nutrient management plans that are understandable, helpful and defensible, we'd - we try to achieve a balance between production and environmental interests.

We wanted to achieve effective nutrient planning, we definitely, definitely wanted to use the latest science and technology and to really give our states clearer, better guidance on how to - how to go about this.

We'd been at this probably over 18 months on this particular standard, just because of the interest in it.

We had informal review comments, we had formal review comments, this went out in the Federal Register, we literally had hundreds of people comment

from Federal agencies, land grant universities, individuals, consultant, research groups, AG interests, conservation interests -- a very broad swath of interest groups.

So here's what is in the standard. What we're directing our planners to do is to work with producers to control water and wind erosion, to apply nutrients when the crops are most likely to take them up to avoid the over-application of nutrients, to avoid application when there's a high risk of nutrient losses to either air or water and to really -- there's an emphasis here on improved record-keeping.

I mentioned that the revised standard really focuses on the four R's, but it also brings in some of the latest risk assessment tools, like to calculate erosion risk. There's a new - a nitrogen-leeching index. We also provide people with instructions on how to do a phosphorous risk assessment.

The standard emphasizes the use of remote sensing technology like Precision Ag, which can really assist us in updating our efforts. The use of things like chlorophyll meters, which is really an on-the-fly - the new technology and on-the-fly adjustment of - it will actually read how much nitrogen and phosphorous you need to place on any particular part of the crop as you move across the field.

We're emphasizing adaptive management of the soil and tissue test - testing to - in - at the end of the year to inform what you do the next year. We're also looking at the associated production strategy and other tools we may use like no-till or reduced tillage.

We're looking at the use of enhanced efficiency fertilizers, whether it's nitrogen or phosphorous. We're looking at the management of drainage water.

There are many techniques we have today that we did not have, really, five years ago to manage drainage water to keep some of - to keep those nutrients in the field where the crop and the farmer can use them and on the water that does leave to make sure that it is - we've removed as much of we - as we can.

We think that this will really benefit producers. It helps them, as I mentioned, to - with the financial assistance programs that USDA offers. I think it helps put money in their pocket.

I don't know of any producer who wants to spend more money than they have to for nutrients. And for the environment, I think when you look at all these things in combination, we'll probably see reduced erosion, we'll see reduced nitrogen oxides and ammonia emissions -- particularly if we use those fertilizer enhancements, we can prevent the volatilization of some of the nitrogen.

Let me see. A couple other things here and then I'll open it up. There are a couple things I'd like to mention on what is in here and the direction we are providing our field people.

One, we're telling our field people that when they plan with producers to plan erosion to the tolerable soil loss rate -- that's called T. T is really the no net loss of soil standard. So if you're losing five tons of soil through erosion, the parent material is creating five tons. So that's what the T standard is.

However, we recognize that there may be places in the United States where it is literally impossible to get down to T. And in those cases, we have a provision for a waiver.

We're asking the producer to consider other conservation practices to protect water quality, but we do have a waiver provision in there.

We're focusing on the coordinating practices. So it's not just nutrient management, but how can you use nutrient management with something like no-till or terraces.

A lot of the research we're finding now encourages us that conservation practices work best when they're in a system. And you really - we feel that it needs to be more than just nutrient management and you need to look at other things.

The last thing I'll say before opening this up is there was a fair amount of, oh, comment we received on the frozen soil issue. How did the - and this relates to when can you, can you or when can you place manure in the winter on frozen or snow-covered soils.

This was one we grappled with. I think we have worked out a reasonable response to that. Basically when NRCS plans animal waste facilities around AFO's or KFO's, we will plan with the producer for 180 days of storage of the manure, which will actually, you know, should get them through the winter until the - until the - until the soils are thawed.

However, there's a lot of, you know, states it's already there. And in those cases, that may be an issue. So instead of NRCS in Washington DC trying to mandate what occurs in this particular issue, we are directing our state -- NRCS in every state -- to work with their state water quality agency to define the circumstances under which manure could be applied on frozen soils -- what associated conservation practices do you need with it? What are the conditions that that is likely to occur?

I should mention right now that of the 50 states, this is only going to apply in about 25. Some states already have laws on this issue and state law trumps anything we would do -- we're very respectful of state and local ordinances.

So we're really talking about 25 states and generally they're in the northern tier of the lower 48. We do have stuff in here about nitrogen indexes. If a state doesn't have one, we have instructions to our field staff on how to do phosphorous risk assessments.

We're particularly concerned about phosphorous that - where it's built up in the soil -- particularly in these impaired watersheds where phosphorous is a risk. And you all probably know of those areas around the country.

So with that, I'll kind of close and open it up for any questions. And Dr. Honeycutt/Mr. Davis are here as well.

Rod?

Rod Bain: Great.

Reporters, this is a reminder. If you have a question for NRCS chief Dave White and NRCS representatives, please press star 1 on your telephone touchtone pad.

And let's go directly to the phone lines this afternoon to Dan Charles of NPR. Dan? Good Day.

Dan Charles: Hi.

You know, I haven't seen side-by-side the previous standard and the current standard, so I wondered if you could just give me one or two examples of farm practices that would be changed under the - this new standard compared with the previous standard.

What would a farmer, say, in Maryland or Iowa now, you know, have to do differently?

Dave White: Okay, Dan. Let me take a shot at that. This is Dave White and then I'll ask Mr. Russell to follow up.

But what you're going to see here, Dan, is a lot of the newer technologies -- the corn stalk test in the fall -- find out where you're at. And it may change your prescription of fertilizer the next Spring.

Certainly nitrogen inhibitors where we can keep - where we can apply the nitrogen so it keeps it in an ammonia form where the plants can use it -- that's new. A lot of the precision Ag stuff is new.

And John, you want to...

John Davis: Certainly.

And I think an additional feature - many of these conservation practices are the same that we have always used. But we're trying to talk about grouping them in suites to coordinate the control - prevent the loss of nutrients from the agricultural landscape.

So it's not so much that we're using new conservation practices as it is we're trying to coordinate those practices on site.

Dave White: The other thing, Dan, I think is relatively new is the use of this - the phosphorous index.

In the national instruction that accompanies this standard, we have a national instruction which talks about the nitrogen index, which is really a leeching index.

Most of our data, Dan, shows that subsurface nitrogen leeching is our biggest water quality problem. But there's also stuff in there that shows our states what we're looking for in a phosphorous index.

And we tell them to - we really want phosphorous put in three categories -- low risk, moderate risk or high risk. And something different this time around is if you are in a low risk area, then you could really apply phosphorous above crop removal rates.

If you're in a moderate risk, we're only going to recommend application of phosphorous at crop removal rates. And if you are in a high risk area, Dan, where if there's buildup of phosphorous in the soil, the max we will do - recommend is phosphorous at crop removal rates, but we will also develop a withdrawal - a draw-down strategy to start taking - actually mining the phosphorous out of the soil through the use of cover crops or, say, a silage corn where the entire - which is high nitrogen - phosphorous intense and you'd take the whole thing off.

So that's some of the new stuff, Dan.

Dan Charles: Okay.

Dave White: Is that okay?

Dan Charles: All right.

Rod Bain: There we go.

And waiting in the wings, we'll hear from Dave Russell in Brownfield Ag Network in just a few minutes. But first, let's go to Chuck Abbott of Reuters with our next question.

And Chuck, good day.

Chuck Abbott: All right, thank you.

Let me ask - and I'm - I'll apologize if I make you repeat something because I got into the call a few minutes late. Perhaps you can tell us how many acres, you know, how many millions of acres this - these - this new standard might apply to.

If it's, you know, it seemed from what I heard of your description it applies only to people who are participating in programs such as Equip or the Conservation Security Program to - where they're taking on additional practices.

Would it apply to people to - would it apply to people who've - who are working under the standard conservation compliance rule, assuming there is a standard - assuming there is a conservation compliance rule.

As I said, if you can make a suggestion, like, how many acres out of the US crop land or crop land and grasslands total it'll apply to, that would be helpful.

Dave White: First Mr. Abbott, let me reassure you it is perfectly okay to ask me to repeat anything.

I have a great deal of respect, admiration and fear of the fourth state -- not so much fear. But you ask a good question.

If - how - the bulk of what this could apply to, Mr. Abbott, is the 370-368 million acres of cropland we have. We see that as the biggest area where it could be applied.

Of course it could also be applied on pastureland or rangeland. So the universe is really anywhere that a farmer/rancher/woodland owner would apply nutrients.

And we - we'll use this for those who are interested in the nutrient management aspects of the voluntary conservation programs we operate, like Equip or CSP or stuff like that.

There is no linkage to conservation compliance. The conservation compliance that was put in signed by President Reagan on December 23rd 1985 really only deals with erosion control and the draining of wetlands -- there is no nutrient requirement with that.

Last farm bill there were some groups that wanted to see that happen, but it - in fact, that did not make it in. That is more of a farm bill issue, Chuck.

Chuck Abbott: Okay, so...

Rod Bain: And reporters, this is a reminder.

If you have a question for any of our guests from the Natural Resources Conservation Service -- including Chief Dave White -- please press star 1 on your telephone touchtone pad.

And let's go to Dave Russell from the Brownfield Ag Network. Dave -- good day.

Dave Russell: Hi, Rod. Thanks. Chief White -- always a pleasure.

Question. Does NRCS have the staffing or adequate staffing to provide the assistance that is going to be required?

Dave White: Good question, Dave.

Technical assistance has always been something we've struggled, you know, to adequately have and fund. We have several things underway internally that's going to actually result in an increase of our technical staff.

Dave, we talked before. My goal is to get people moved out of the offices and onto the farms and we're going to be doing some pretty cool stuff this year to that effect.

We've also expanded the use of technical service providers significantly. And particularly, I think industry-wide you're looking at CCAA's -- the certified crop advisors -- could be extremely engaged in this.

We are going to be hosting some Webinars -- some training -- for outside consultants who would be interested. So you raised a good question. Last year, Dave, I think - I think we did something like 103 thousand of these for

producers -- 103 thousand of these nutrient management plans were applied across the country.

So if the demand stays about the same, we'll be able to keep up with that. And Dave, that really doesn't include what the private consultants and management firms are doing.

Rod Bain: NRCS chief Dave White and representatives of NRCS are with us here at the USDA Radio Studios live and they await your questions.

And if you have one, reporters, all you have to do is press star 1 on your telephone touchtone pad.

And let's go to our next question that belongs to Tom Ritter of WNAX. Tom, good day.

Tom Ritter: Good day. Thank you very much.

Dave, I'm just kind of wondering. You were mentioning this - the new idea of applying on frozen ground. Could you expand a little bit about - on that how that would work and when that would be available to do that? Or...

Dave White: An early - an early draft of this standard just simply precluded the use of it -- say, we can't do it.

It's not a wise thing to do. And while I believe that's accurate, it's really not fair to producers around the country where, you know, for this - inside the beltway bureaucrat to start dictating stuff.

So we thought pretty long and hard about this, Tom, and really felt the best way to approach it - it was on a state-specific basis. So we here - in this standard, we are directing our NRCS state conservationists to work with their state water quality agency -- whatever that may be called -- to work with them to develop a way of - to define the circumstances that you - that that would be okay -- what kind of soils, what kind of climatic conditions, what type of topography, what type of supporting conservation practices.

We didn't want to just say no. We wanted to leave it up to the states that they could work together to define circumstances under which that might occur. And how that plays out, Tom, across the 25 or so states that this is an issue, I just don't know yet.

I should mention that we're rolling this - the standard is live today, but our states have until January 1st 2013. They will have a full year to work these kinds of things out in their own states with their partners and state agencies.

Is that okay, Tom?

Tom Ritter: Yes. And thank you very much.

Dave White: All right.

Rod Bain: Thank you, Tom.

And we will here from Burt Rutherford in a few minutes with BEEF magazine, but our next question belongs to Amanda Peterka of Environment and Energy publishing.

Amanda, good day.

Amanda Peterka: Hi. Thanks for taking my question.

I just wanted to follow up on the question two people ago about whether the - whether NRCS would have the staff to be able to, you know, carry out these changes in the nutrient management standard.

I'm wondering if you anticipate, you know, the - everything happening with the farm bill next year, if that would, you know, decrease the amount of resources you have and how that's going to effect being able to carry out the standard?

Dave White: Wow, Amanda.

You know, Amanda, I kind of have a contrarian view to what many people are calling the secret farm bill. I actually thought that Senator Stabenow, (unintelligible) Roberts, Representative Lucas, Representative Peterson really did a good job.

We were - I was called in periodically to - for technical assistance. And based on what I saw, I thought they did an awesome job with title two. I'm not familiar with the other titles, but I know they had broad agreement on the conservation title.

So I don't know where this goes this coming year. I think it only gets tougher, Amanda. Who knows what the January new CBO score will be -- what kind of money the committees will have to work with.

But to tell you the truth I think with those four leaders -- the bipartisan/bicameral leaders and the staff they have -- I am confident that with whatever resources they have to work with, I think they'll do a great job.

I think they did awesome in the effort that was presented or was going to be presented to the super committee. And I just think we have the A team on this and they will do the best they can with whatever resources they end up with.

And I'm fully expecting we're not going to see huge increases in conservation and we'll just have to - it would be my job and all of our job to manage the resources we have effectively and efficiently for our producers, for the taxpayer and for the environment.

Amanda Peterka: Thank you.

Rod Bain: And let's go to our final question of the day that belongs to Burt Rutherford of BEEF magazine.

Burt, good day.

Burt Rutherford: Thank you. Thank you for taking my question.

And it is, are you going to emphasize certain regions or certain states as far as rolling out this new standard?

Dave White: Burt, every state is going to - I can't think of a part of the country where this is not going to be a big issue.

When I - when I think of livestock production I'll - or - I'm thinking, god, you know, it's everywhere. I'm thinking the phosphorous risk assessment - when I

look at some of the arid regions of the west, I'm thinking a lot of - that will be a big issue on how they define that. I think of the grasslands of Montana that I'm mostly familiar with. I just think it could be anywhere in the country.

My experience with ranchers and the beef-producing industry -- it has been nothing but positive, Burt. I was the state conservationist in Montana before I got this job and I think they're wonderful stewards.

NRCS for years and years and years has supported the stewardship awards that are given to top-drawer beef producers and I hope to continue that. But I think globally across the country -- I can't think of one place that's going to be emphasized more than another.

There me more attention placed on it in places like the Chesapeake Bay, the Great Lakes, the upper Mississippi, but I would hope that states everywhere will take this seriously and advance it.

And Rod, why do we have to leave? I (unintelligible).

Rod Bain: Would you like to take a couple more questions?

Dave White: Yes, if they have them.

Rod Bain: Okay.

We have at least two more questions on the line. And let's go to Sarah Wyant of Agri-Pulse with our next question. Sarah, good day.

Sarah Wyant: Good afternoon. And thank you, Chief White, for hosting this call.

I had a little different variation on the question about regional participation. And I just wanted you to perhaps share in the past year when you're talking about 103 thousand that your folks had worked with, are there some states that seem to be more eagerly adopting some of these practices than others?

And if you could share a little bit about what you think has been driving the innovation in some parts of the country.

Dave White: Good - great question, Sarah.

I don't have the break down for where these have occurred with me, but I can tell you my sense is that this is primarily occurring in areas where the increased regulatory pressure or the fear of increased regulatory pressure is really taking over a lot of the conversation.

And of course, Sarah, that would be the Chesapeake Bay states. We have had now -- I think we're entering our third year in the Mississippi river where we have something - 70 or 80 smaller watersheds with high nutrient losses that we're targeting our efforts to try to do something about the nutrients going down to the Gulf of Mexico.

So I would say that areas where there is increased regulatory pressure is where I would expect this to be the most emphasis given.

Rod Bain: NRCS chief Dave White and representatives of NRCS join us in the studio.

And reporters if you have a question for the chief or his guests, please press star 1 on your telephone touchtone pad.

Let's go to John Heltman of Inside EPA with the next question. John, good day.

John Heltman: Hi. Thanks for having this teleconference.

You mentioned earlier on that the - these standards are sometimes used by other agencies in their nutrient management projects. I was wondering if you could elaborate on that and if - and specifically how this dovetails with the EPA's Nonpoint management projects?

Dave White: John you were kind of breaking up there, but I think I got the gist of it.

There - I don't really want to name the names of the states, but there's some states, say, in the Northeast that will take these standards and make them their standards for water quality purposes.

And one of the things that, you know, I mention NRCS is not regulatory. And our stuff is - it's produced with your funds. You know, it's underwritten by the taxpayers, so it's public documents and any other entity can use these.

So we're very cognizant when we write them that they have to be scientifically credible. And we also try to write them to achieve that balance we talked about between protecting the environment and also having the flexibility for the producers can continue to produce our food and fiber.

Rod Bain: And let's go to the phone lines.

Our next question belongs to Chris Torres of Lancaster Farming newspaper. Chris, good day.

Chris Torres: Hi. How are you? How are you guys doing?

Dave White: Just living the dream, Chris.

Chris Torres: Okay, good. Good.

Well, I'm located up here in Lancaster Country and I'm really eager to see - to get your - to get your opinion on how you think these standards are going to impact some of the conservation we're currently being done here in the Chesapeake Bay - Chesapeake Bay area?

Dave White: Oh, that's a - that's great Chris, because you're kind of, you know, Lancaster County -- you're world-famous and you have a high concentration of livestock there.

If I look at the bay, Chris, you know, I'd - I'm a lot more bullish on our ability to turn the bay around than most people. I've read the Conservation Effects Assessment Project for the Chesapeake Bay, I've talked to some of our top scientists about what they think is going on.

And let me just tell you, when you look at some of the technology that's coming out with Precision Ag, adaptive management with how we can manage our drainage water through bioreactors -- through the control gates -- when you look at the emphasis on the four R's, bay-wide, Chris, you know, you - most of our farmers are maybe doing two or three of the four R's right now.

And the only thing we'd have to do is get them to, you know, to pick up that last one or two. If we get the four R's, I just think that it's a game changer for

us. I think - I'm just excited about the potential that we have to really improve the resource base.

Rod Bain: And now we go to John Dobberstein of No-Till Farmer with the next question for chief Dave White and members of the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

John, good day.

John Dobberstein: Good afternoon.

Just checking to see if you've had discussions with other departments about the evaluation part of this? I know there's been some - apparently disagreement over what data is used to measure success.

I just wondered how that was going to happen going forward where you know what you're accomplishing?

Dave White: Oh.

John brings up a great point in that. You know, we're pretty doggone good about getting conservation on the - on the land and maybe not so good about measuring the outcomes -- the actual conservation benefits of that.

The biggest thing we have going for us right now, John, is the SEEP study -- the conservation effects assessment project. This started as a little instruction in the 2002 farm bill and we've already released the studies for upper Mississippi, Great Lakes and Chesapeake.

The Ohio/Tennessee region is under peer review right now -- that should be out shortly. We've got about eight/nine/ten that will be coming out within this year moving across the country, which will really assess the status of things as they are.

These are establishing our baseline, John. And then we will go back and take further snapshots to update that baseline. Like right now, John -- and Chris from Lancaster, you'll be interested in this as well -- the SEEP study in the bay, we looked at - this - it was 700 farmers -- looked at their conservation practices, their soil types, their production methods.

We know the soil chemistry -- everything there. And that's how we came up with the data for the SEEP projects. Well, we are now in the process -- we've contracted with the National Ag Statistics Service.

We are going back five years later, talking to those same 700 producers and we're adding 700 -- maybe 800. I think we're going to do 1500 points that NASA's doing right now.

So come springtime, John, we will have the original Chesapeake Bay SEEP data and we will have the updated stuff for release later this year so we can actually be able to assess the gains we have made in the last few years, John.

John Dobberstein: Thank you.

Rod Bain: Great.

And let's have one more question. And it's actually a return for Amanda Peterka of Environmental and Energy Publishing with our last question of the day for chief Dave White and members of NRCS.

Amanda?

Amanda Peterka: Hi. Thanks again for taking my questions.

Just a quick one. I'm wondering about farmers, you know, a lot of them already have nutrient management plans. Will they have to rewrite them? Or what work does this mean for them?

Dave White: No.

No, this is not an ex pos facto thing. This is a forward-looking thing, Amanda.

Amanda Peterka: Okay.

Dave White: If you have a nutrient management plan under Equip, Wildlife (unintelligible), whatever -- it's still good. We're not going to mess with anything there.

This is for future stuff. And Rod, are you on the clock or something? I mean, it's Christmas. Can we keep going, or...

Man: Well...

Rod Bain: Hold on just one second here.

We're getting the word from the studio. Actually, we're waiting for more calls as well. So let's do this. I'll ask a - I have - actually have a question for you as well.

And this is involved in improved record keeping. And we had talked - you had mentioned that earlier. Give us some real-world examples of what that means and some of those practices that may already be in effect.

John Davis: Yes.

I think the issue is very much if you don't keep good records, it's very hard to establish the - what you have done and what you have accomplished. The idea here is to know what you've done in the past, evaluate what you've done and make improvements so that you can improve nutrient use efficiency, perhaps cut down on the amount of nutrients that you're applying -- save money for producers.

That's a lot of it.

It also has the added effect of being able to demonstrate that you're doing things right so when people come knocking on the door wanting to know what you've done, you can pull out your records and show them.

And that's of great benefit to producers.

Rod Bain: Great.

And that was John Davis with NRCS. He's joined with chief Dave White. We also have (unintelligible)...

Dave White: Dr. Wayne Honeycutt.

Rod Bain: Dr. Wayne Honeycutt. We appreciate that.

And of course you on the phone lines and then listening audience, you have a question, please press star 1 on your telephone touchtone pad.

And let's go to the next caller -- that's Julie McPeake of Southeast AgNET.  
Julie, good day.

Julie McPeake: Hi, Chief. How are you?

Dave White: Basking in the warmth and love that permeate the capitol city, Julie.

Julie McPeake: I know better. I've been there. I know how cold it is right now.

We have talked quite a bit or ya'll have talked quite a bit regarding how this is going to affect the northern producers in - there in the Chesapeake Bay, but obviously us south -easterners are dealing with our regulatory issues as well.

Florida specifically has quite a bit of those. Can you speak a little bit to those growers?

Dave White: Yes, I think this is - it is really good for growers no matter where they are.

And I think it relates back to something I said earlier, Julie, in that I have yet to meet a producer who wants to spend more for their nutrients than they absolutely have to.

They want to maintain or increase their yields, but they don't want to, you know, provide nitrogen for somebody who's downstream. So I think that this really helps the efficiency issue for our producers so we can maximize our crop production by using just the right amount of fertilizers -- no more, no less, but that which is right.

And I think if we do this right - John mentioned the benefits of the record keeping, but also the benefits of production. And we'll also achieve some environmental benefits, Julie, as well.

Rod Bain: Great.

We have Chris Torres and Dan Charles who will have return questions in just a minute or two. But first, let's go to Chris Clayton with DTN with the next question for chief Dave White and members of NRCS.

Chris, good day.

Chris Clayton: Thank you guys. And thank you Chief White, for continuing to extend out on the calls and questions.

I was wondering if you have any idea how much nitrogen or phosphorous reduction overall nationally could come from these changes, then?

Dave White: That is a great question.

Chris Clayton: I mean, do you have a benefit analysis or something? Or...

Dave White: And I should say right now, Chris, that there may be instances where this planning process results in increased nitrogen and phosphorous.

It's not targeted solely towards a reduction strategy -- it's really targeted towards a best use strategy. So there may be producers who are under-applying and we would actually recommend that you beef that up.

But as far as what it might amount to nationally, doggone it. I don't know national figures. But if you look at one of the practices recommended in this standard -- like, take adaptive manage - adaptive management.

What we are finding where adaptive management is being used, you can often reduce nitrogen by 20 to 40 pounds per acre. So if you use that as your rule of thumb, just multiply it by the number of acres we can get that applied on.

Rod Bain: And let's go to Chris Torres. He's with Lancaster Farming newspaper. He has a follow up question for chief Dave White and John Davis and Wayne Honeycutt of NRCS.

Go ahead, Chris.

Chris Torres: Thank you again. And, you know, I apologize - I'm going to go ahead and apologize if you guys have answered this question already and I just wasn't maybe listening correctly.

But, you know, I just - I'm trying to wrap my heads - my hands around the practical, I guess -- how this is going to impact farmers, practically speaking. How are they going to see these impacts?

So just clarify for me where producers will see these changes.

Dr. Wayne Honeycutt: Hi. This is Wayne Honeycutt.

I guess I'd like to take that one for you, Chris. You know, I think there are a number of ways that they may see it. You know, NRCS is very honored to be able to provide technical and financial support for a number of these voluntary

conservation programs because these are tested innovative strategies that we are now getting in the books and getting on the field.

And some of those -- now we'll be able to provide that technical and financial assistance to help them do some of these measures, to use some of these practices that will then reduce nutrient losses to water, for example, that will help improve the nutrient uptake and recovery by the crop.

The chief mentioned things like the controlled-release fertilizers, another similar type of a product called nitrification inhibitors, which really kind of helps keep the nitrogen and the ammonium form instead of the nitrate form.

And so now we are going to really be able to work one-on-one with producers to support the use of those practices for the environmental and the economic benefits to growers.

Dave White: Chris, let me just chime in here.

We had a pretty good toolbox before, but it's just like we went down to Sears. We got - we just got a whole new set of Craftsman stuff to put in that toolbox. And by golly, we're going to use it.

Rod Bain: And let's go to Dan Charles of NPR. He has a follow up question for chief Dave White and representatives of the Natural Resources Conservation service.

Dan, good day.

Dan Charles: Extending the question time.

I'd just like to press you a little bit more on this question of how much do you think this can accomplish in terms of nutrient losses to the environment. I mean, in the past when I've gotten into this topic I've been told by people that even best management practices from, you know, land grant universities still result in farming practices that release nutrients to the environment, produce eutrophic lakes, produce, you know, eutrophic estuaries.

If you follow these practices, are you still going to be, you know, are you still going to have these - this environmental damage? I mean, specifically - I mean, would you - wouldn't you have to do something more dramatic to really eliminate the environmental damage?

Like, say, you know, reduce, you know, your yield goals? Or, you know, you're not allowed to, you know, spread fertilizer in the fall in Iowa the way it's typically done.

I mean, how - wouldn't you have to go further, I guess is my question.

Dave White: Well I've got to tell you, Dan, thanks for pressing me. And I'm going to press back a little bit, if that's okay.

Dan Charles: Sure.

Dave White: If you're looking for somebody who wants to regulate agriculture, you're probably talking to the wrong guy, because I am firmly in the camp of - I believe the voluntary incentive-based approach works best.

Seventy percent of our land, Dan, in the lower 48 states is owned by private individuals. And I don't care what you do at the Federal, State, Local County lands, the fate of the environment is going to hinge on the millions of

individual decisions made by the men and women who own and operate that land.

And I think it is much more effective to incentivise and work voluntarily than to use a regulatory approach. But that's my culture. I'm in the Department of Agriculture.

As far as what you're saying, though, I think that this could have tremendous widespread - a continental impact on how we use nutrients. Dan we have 2800 field offices in NRCS, from up in Aroostook County Maine over to Hawaii, Alaska down to Puerto Rico.

And working with producers no matter we are to adopt these new technologies, to get more increased use of the four R's -- I think it's going to have a huge impact.

We've spent \$80 million extra last year in the Mississippi river basin primarily centered on nutrient reduction. We are working with groups from the Iowa Soybean Association to the Environmental Defense Fund to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation to - partners across the country are engaging with us.

It's not just an NRCS issue -- it is really an agriculture and the stakeholder issues. And I think we can effectively deal with this in a - in a voluntary approach.

And let Dan have a comeback in case I pushed too hard and he's mad at me.

Dan Charles: No, no. I'm not mad at you at all. This is your - this is good.

The question isn't so much whether it's voluntary or not. I think the question that I have in mind is, you know, you can write your standards however you'd like. It seems like what you're telling me is you need to write the standards to accommodate what farmers are currently willing to do.

Dave White: I think we try to work with producers on a site-specific basis and we try to develop plans that meet their goals.

You know, I know a lot of farmers and ranchers and I haven't met one yet that's bent on world domination. They just want to raise their kids, pay the rent and go to the café every now and then. But we can use this to advance conservation on the landscape.

Let me give you a concrete example. We are - we're trying the approach that's in this standard of avoid, control or trap. So when we're looking at nutrients, what are those conservation practices where we can avoid the problem, first off? And I think a good nutrient management four R strategy is really perfect for that.

And secondly, you move down. Okay, there's going to be an issue. How can - what practices will help us control this? And there, you're looking at things like conservation tillage or terraces.

And then finally you go, "Okay, well now how can - if there is something left, how can we trap it?" And here we're looking at constructed wetlands or buffer strips or filter strips or repairing buffer areas.

So we have in our arsenal in this toolbox -- I believe we have the conservation practices to do it. And we have also been blessed by Congress with having the financial wherewithal.

Last year, I think we had \$2.3 billion go out in financial assistance to help farmers adopt these new technologies. And keep in mind that \$2.3 sounds like a lot. But generally, that's going to be matched by another \$2.3 billion that comes out of the farmer's pocket.

So they have a very vested interest in this. It's not like the Feds were coming in and paying 100%. We're paying 50% or in some situations 75% -- it varies across the board.

So the farmer and rancher always have some of their own money in this and I think that's the way that we can really effect continental change in this particular area.

I'll defer to my colleague from NPR -- Dan -- if you want to come back at me.

Dan Charles: No, no. That's fine.

Thanks very much.

Dave White: Okay.

Rod Bain: Thank you, Dan.

And let's go to John Dobberstein of No-Till Farmer. He has a follow up question as well for chief Dave White as well as John and Wayne from NRCS.

Go ahead, John.

John Dobberstein: Yes. Thanks for having me back.

What's your response to growers who say that, you know, my - prices are so high right now, why should I change? You know, why should I do things differently?

What are you going to - if you aren't going to have increased funds to provide incentives, what are you going to say to try to convince them?

Dave White: I think I would just use an economic argument.

I mean, if somebody didn't want to - doesn't want to do it, that's their prerogative. We're willing to work with them in a spirit of cooperation. But I think it just makes - if you go - if you go into a restaurant and they have a hamburger plate for \$10 and they have a hamburger plate that's identical for \$5, which one are you going to pick? They're both the same.

I think the salability to the producers is the improved nutrient use efficiency. Our farmers and ranchers are very much geared towards trying to find ways to improve their operations, increase their efficiency.

And I think that's the salable part on this, John.

John Dobberstein: Thank you.

Rod Bain: I do have one question for you Chief, or John and Wayne, if you want to handle this.

And this involves training for field staff on these new nutrient management standards. And in the context -- as you alluded to, there has been a lot of

advances in technology over the last five years since the last time these standards have been updated.

So give us some ideas as far as training that has either been taking place, is ongoing, or is planned for the future.

John Davis: Yes.

Well of course we're attempting to develop a schedule for training. And I think would initially roll it out to our technical staffs at the regional centers and have them roll it to the local staff.

We'll also be involved in trying to educate our partners on the impact of this standard and types of information that they'll need to have to understand where we're going.

Dave White: Hey, I want one more thing. (unintelligible).

Rod Bain: Yes, go ahead.

I was just going to ask you, because we're out of phone calls. So we'll go ahead and open the floor for closing remarks. So whatever you would like to throw out there, Chief.

Dave White: Okay.

Dan from NPR, I misstated something. I am interested in regulating two things. One's my blood pressure and the other's my waistline.

In the standard when we talk about the nutrient use efficiencies and things like that or manure testing, we do put standards in there. Like, we realize there may be some products on the market that are - have not been, like, fully vetted -- some people might use the word snake oil.

So any of these performance assessment enhancers -- we're really requiring them that they be certified. We have identified certification agencies for manure testing. We like the Minnesota Department of Ag certification -- that criteria.

So we do have some standards built in there to make sure that we're using the products that will really make a difference.

I would just like to thank you for extending this. I'm sorry to have made this an issue. But let me just give my office phone number in case any of the people who called in think of something and they want to visit with me.

It's 202-720-7246. And then my cell number is 202-579-9642. And you can call day or night 24/7.

Rod Bain: Oh, no.

Dave White: Make it - you make it...

Rod Bain: You might want to make that a few hours less than that.

Dave White: Make it 16/7.

Rod Bain: Reporters -- hey, thank you for your questions today and all of you in the listening audience.

And we'd like to thank chief Dave White as well as John Davis and Wayne Honeycutt of the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

This is Rod Bain from the USDA Radio Studios in Washington DC wishing you all a great day.

END