United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Iowa State Office
210 Walnut Street Room 693
Des Moines, Iowa 50309

Iowa Bulletin: 190-23-1 **Date:** October 28, 2022

Subject: ECS – Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 Conservation Planning

Purpose. To provide guidance on conservation planning for FY 2023.

Expiration Date. September 30, 2023

Explanation. This bulletin provides guidance on conservation planning, resource concern selection and evaluation, and conservation planning documentation requirements.

Conservation Planning

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides conservation planning and technical assistance to individuals, groups, tribes, and units of government to help plan and carry out conservation decisions to meet their objectives. The National Planning Procedures Handbook (NPPH) provides guidance on conservation planning for planners. The National Resource Concern List and Planning Criteria is the official list of NRCS resource concerns and planning criteria used to determine resource treatment levels using the conservation planning process. Planning Criteria states the minimum level of treatment required to address a given resource concern.

Conservation planning is dynamic, progressive, and adaptive. Initially, a client may only be interested in a single practice to meet one of their resource concerns, but through the planning process additional resource concerns and opportunities may be identified and addressed. Developing and building relationships through onsite visits is an integral part of conservation planning. These visits and relationships are especially important to fully understand the landscape, resources, and human values involved in the conservation planning process.

Financial assistance is often part of the discussion when the client is considering alternatives, but conservation planning is program neutral.

Resource Concern Selection and Evaluation

Some resource concerns may be relatively common, but each site and client may have unique resource concerns, site conditions, and situations. During field visits and conversations with the client, the conservation planner and client determine which resource concerns will be evaluated. *Note: Some programs, such as the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), define the minimum resource concerns to be evaluated.* Decisions will be based on the client's objectives, observations made on-site during the inventory process, local, state, and national conservation priorities, and conservation program requirements.

A field visit and conversation with the client is critical to understanding the client's concerns and developing a good inventory of the land. Many clues often tell the planner what resource concerns may exist. Visible soil erosion, poor plant health, nearby water features, or steep unprotected slopes are simple observations that can guide the planner on potential resource concerns to evaluate. Communicating with the client will also provide clues about potential resource concerns. The client came to us with a problem that needs to be solved, so the planner needs to evaluate resource concerns related to that problem. Additional concerns may be revealed to the planner by talking with the client and showing interest in their operation.

At a minimum, the conservation planner and client identified resource concerns must be evaluated, then documented in the Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART). Additional evaluations may be completed to gain a better understanding of the cumulative impacts on the environment.

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Planners must use their knowledge, skills, and abilities to provide the correct data for the resource concerns entered in CART to get accurate answers. CART can only make determinations based on the information entered by the planner. Because written guidance cannot cover every contingency, users are required to use sound judgment and the highest ethical standards in their decision-making.

Planners evaluate resource conditions to determine if they meet minimum acceptable condition levels as established by the National Resource Concern List and Planning Criteria. This document may list multiple tools and planning criteria for one resource concern. To be consistent, **conservation planners must follow the guidance in the FY23 Iowa CART Assessment Resource Tool (ICART) to evaluate resource conditions**. Specific assessment tools may be required to answer assessment questions in CART.

Planning Land Units (PLUs) with similar characteristics may be evaluated as one representative unit to increase assessment efficiency. PLUs will not be merged in CD, but data entry may be the same for multiple PLUs. Planners may group land units with similar characteristics based on best professional judgement. If additional guidance is needed, refer to the Area Resource Conservationist (ARC). Document the decision and reasoning for grouping in the CPA-6 notes, assessment tool, or CART documentation form.

All CART results must be reviewed by an experienced planner to determine if the results match planner's expectations. If the assessment results (meeting or not meeting the threshold) do not match planner's expectations, the planner may complete an override. If the planner completes an override for a resource concern, documentation of the assessment tool must be included in the justification (e.g., Sheet and Rill Erosion must have RUSLE2 completed for documentation. The override comment must include the planning soil and resulting soil loss).

Conservation Planning Documentation Requirements and Reviews

Financial assistance applications must start with a good plan. Steps 1 through 7 of the planning process must be completed to understand the client's objectives, the baseline system, existing resource concerns, additional conservation opportunities, and potential impacts to special environmental concerns.

At a minimum, field offices will document the following information:

1. Client's objectives.

2. Planning visit. Include the date and location of the visit and participating individuals.

3. Description and analysis of the baseline system. Include existing practices, whether they are functioning or not, and the environmental evaluation.

4. Identification of the resource concerns, agreed to by the planner and the client, addressed with the conservation plan.

5. Description and Analysis of the Planned System. Include the environmental evaluation and all Special Environmental Concerns (SECs).

    - The Nutrient Management Screening Tool must be completed if Nutrient Management CPS 590 or 590 enhancements are planned.

Several options are available to planners for documentation, including, but not limited to CPA-6, Assistance Notes, CPA-52, planning maps, worksheets, assessment tools, and ICART. Reminder: Planners must follow the guidance in the FY23 ICART to evaluate resource conditions.

Existing Resource Concern Conditions (all assessed resource concerns), No Action Alternative, Preferred Alternative, and Effects of Alternatives (e.g., CPA-52 Sections F, H, and I) must be documented. The documentation may be on the CPA-52 or may refer to a CART Assessment Report. If a CART Assessment Report is used, it must be prepared from the Action menu in CART by selecting Action > Reports > Assessment Report. The report must include the Resource Inventory, Existing Practices, Planned Practices, and Results (Graph View). Since the CART Assessment Report is specific for each practice schedule and documents resource conditions at a point in time, the Assessment Report must be saved electronically (may be printed and stapled to the CPA-52 if the report is less than 10 pages). Refer to area guidance for electronic file location. Instructions for creating the Assessment Report are located on the Ecological Sciences SharePoint site and must be followed.

The environmental evaluation must be completed simultaneously with planning and will not be considered a separate process or requirement. The environmental evaluation will be documented on the CPA-52 to show compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). **All** Special Environmental Concerns (SECs) must be evaluated for Existing Conditions, No Action impacts, and Preferred Alternative impacts (e.g., CPA-52 Sections G and J) for all conservation planning efforts. If federal programs are pursued, the SECs must be evaluated **before ranking**.

The Threatened and Endangered Species Baseline Assessment will be completed. If additional assessments are required, field office staff will complete the applicable assessments before ranking. If consultation from US Fish and Wildlife Service is needed, field office staff will initiate the process immediately. The consultation process must be complete before financial assistance can be obligated.

Staff must follow the Iowa NRCS Cultural Resources Methods, which is found in the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG), Section II, Cultural Resources Information. The Cultural Resources Flowchart will be completed by staff who have the appropriate Cultural Resources Training. If all the conservation practices will have little to no effect on cultural resources per Appendix A, the process is complete. If any conservation practice has potential to affect cultural resources, Background and field investigations for the area of potential effect (APE) must be completed. If indicated through the flow chart process, field office staff will submit Geoportal Cultural Resources Requests to the State Archaeologists. The State Archeologists will review the request to determine the next steps. For federal programs, the above-mentioned process must be completed prior to project ranking. When the State Archaeologists determine that consultation with State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), Office of the State Archaeologist (OSA) and tribes is required, consultation will occur. The entire cultural resources review procedures must be complete before federal financial assistance can be obligated.

The planner and client must have enough preliminary information to understand what will be expected to meet selected conservation practice standards. The planner needs to provide the client a reasonable cost estimate for planned practices so the client can make decisions for their operation. The planner must have a reasonable financial incentive estimate (list of practices and estimated planned amounts) for financial assistance program administration.

Resources

The Ecological Sciences SharePoint site will house documents and links for planners to use and reference in the FY23 Conservation Planning folder.

This site will include:

- FY23 ICART
- Nutrient Management Screening Tool
- CART Assessment Report for CPA-52 instructions
- Link to NPPH
- Link to National Resource Concern List and Planning Criteria

Additional documents or links may be added as needed.

Contact. If you have questions about the contents of this bulletin, please contact Michael Henderson, State Resource Conservationist, at 515-323-2292.

Jon Hubbert
State Conservationist

Attachment: FY23 Iowa CART Assessment Resource Tool (ICART)