



United States Department of Agriculture



NRCS Strategic Plan Update FY2016-2018



Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

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Mission, Vision and Conservation Process

Mission Statement

Helping People Help the Land

NRCS improves the health of our Nation's natural resources while sustaining and enhancing the productivity of American agriculture. We achieve this by providing voluntary assistance through strong partnerships with private landowners, managers, and communities to conserve, protect, restore, and enhance the lands and waters upon which people and the environment depend.

Vision Statement

Productive working lands in harmony with a healthy environment.

Conservation Process

Resource Inventory and Assessment



Technical Assistance and Technology Transfer



Conservation Implementation



Productive Lands and Healthy Environment



Message from the Chief

As I travel across the nation I see firsthand how our work is making an impact on the land and in the communities we serve. Through conservation, we're helping to promote economic growth and prosperity in rural America. We're fostering a conservation ethic, preserving cultural traditions and protecting livelihoods. We're ensuring the sustainability of our food and water supply for generations to come.

With ever increasing pressure on natural resources, America's farmers and ranchers will be challenged to maintain and boost agricultural productivity while conserving natural resources for the future. To do our part, NRCS will focus on four key priorities as a foundation for this work.

1. Deliver excellent and innovative service.

Our hallmark for over 80 years has been our ability to deliver high-quality technical advice and conservation solutions for America's farmers, ranchers, and communities. NRCS will build upon these successes using both proven and innovative approaches for achieving the best conservation results for our customers and taxpayers.

2. Strengthen and modernize conservation delivery.

NRCS customers are diverse and their agricultural systems and conservation needs are becoming more complex. NRCS will ensure it has the information technology, business operations, and skilled workforce to offer excellent service and timely, relevant, and cost-effective conservation solutions for our customers.

3. Enhance and expand NRCS's scientific and technical capabilities.

Our conservation science, technical standards, and decision support tools inform and drive on-the-ground solutions. NRCS will improve and expand on its scientific and technical capabilities—including the development, acquisition, dissemination, and use of tools and knowledge—to remain a leader in delivering conservation assistance for farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners.

4. Broaden our reach to customers and partners.

NRCS has significant experience working with farming, ranching, and private forestry operations to increase conservation adoption. We also have great opportunities to increase conservation access and implementation by identifying new customers, reaching out to new partners, and building local capacity to plan and deliver conservation solutions.

I'm confident we will continue to meet our mission and deliver results for agriculture, for the environment and for the American people we serve.



Jason Weller
Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Strategic Goal 1

Deliver High-Quality Science and Technology for Voluntary Private Lands Conservation

Performance Outcomes

Conservation tools and technologies are accessible, relevant, and effective.
Customers gain tangible value through implementation of conservation plans and systems.

Objective 1.1

Enhance conservation planning with science-based tools and information.

Strategic Initiatives

- Deliver high-quality technical support and information for conservation decision making.
- Improve training, development, and delivery of technical expertise.
- Develop and use science-based tools for conservation planning.
- Develop and refresh technical standards to address new and emerging resource concerns.
- Facilitate and support innovative private-sector opportunities to encourage conservation adoption.

Performance Measures

Technical standards created or revised to ensure inclusion of latest science and technology.

2016:	2017:	2018:
3.4	3.4	3.4

Applicable Programs

- Conservation Technical Assistance Program (Above State)*
- Soil Survey*
- Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting*



Strategic Goal 2

Promote Productive Working Lands and Healthy Waters

Performance Outcomes

Sustained, productive, working farms and ranches that optimize natural resource benefits.

Enhanced and sustained quality and quantity of water resources.

Objective 2.1

Improve soil health.

Objective 2.2

Enhance and improve water quality and water quantity.

Objective 2.3

Provide habitat for diverse and important fish and wildlife species.

Objective 2.4

Improve local air quality and increase carbon sequestration.

Strategic Initiatives

Help agricultural producers address and avoid the need for environmental regulations.

Address national and regional conservation needs and conditions.

Build resilience in agricultural operations.

Performance Measures

Cropland with conservation to improve soil quality (millions of acres)

	2016:	2017:	2018:
CTA	5.9	5.9	5.9
EQIP	3	3	3

Non-federal land with conservation to improve fish and wildlife habitat quality (millions of acres)

	2016:	2017:	2018:
EQIP	1.1	1.1	1.1

Land with conservation to improve water quality (millions of acres)

	2016:	2017:	2018:
CTA	17.9	17.9	17.9
EQIP	12	12	12

Continued on next page.



Strategic Goal 3 (continued)

Protect and Enhance Productive Agricultural Landscapes

Performance Measures (continued)

Grazing and forest land with conservation to protect and improve the resource base (millions of acres)

	2016:	2017:	2018:
CTA	13	13	13
EQIP	13.9	13.9	13.9

Applicable Programs

Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) (State), Regional Conservation Partnership Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Agricultural Management Assistance



Strategic Goal 3

Protect and Enhance Productive Agricultural Landscapes

Performance Outcomes

High-quality, productive lands retained in agricultural uses.

Conserved and functioning landscapes.

Objective 3.1

Keep productive agricultural lands in the farming, ranching, and forest landscape.

Objective 3.2

Protect and manage wetland resources to create landscape scale benefits.

Strategic Initiatives

Enroll easements that help sustain agriculture lands and rural communities.

Restore and enhance priority wetlands and wetland complexes.

Performance Measures

Land protected by conservation easements

	2016:	2017:	2018:
ACEP	110,000	130,000	65,000*

Applicable Program

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

**Authorized funding declined by 50 percent.*



Strategic Goal 4

Support Healthy Watersheds and Diverse Land Use and Communities

Performance Outcomes

Economically viable and environmentally healthy rural communities.

Conservation of landscapes.

Objective 4.1

Protect communities and people through rehabilitated watershed structures.

Objective 4.2

Manage landscape-scale natural resource concerns to create enduring solutions

Strategic Initiatives

Restore and sustain benefits to communities and individuals delivered by priority watershed infrastructure.

Cooperate with local sponsors to implement watershed plans to protect, conserve, and restore land and water resources, and achieve community objectives .

Performance Measures

Number of watershed rehabilitation supplemental plans authorized

2016:	2017:	2018:
37	23	20

Number of dam rehabilitations to be completed

2016:	2017:	2018:
15	12	13

Applicable Programs

Watershed Rehabilitation Program

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (PL-566)



Management Initiative 1

Increase Organizational Effectiveness and Efficiency

Performance Outcomes

More effective operations that add value to conservation delivery

Greater efficiencies in the delivery of programs and services to customers

Objective 1.1

Strategic Initiatives

Strengthen and modernize the delivery of products and services.

Improve the delivery of services within mission support services: human resources, budget and financial, management, and procurement and property.

Ensure information technology infrastructures and applications are current, efficient, and support agency business needs.

Identify and address critical gaps in employee knowledge, skills and abilities.

Create a climate of accountability and compliance through enhanced internal controls and monitoring.

Improve environmental and cultural resources compliance procedures.

Strengthen conservation planning to improve implementation.

Provide accurate and reliable agency data and analysis of agency programs and services.

Performance Measures

Contract implementation ratio (percent)

2016:	2017:	2018:
80	90	100

Conservation quality ratio (percent)

2016:	2017:	2018:
100	100	100

Continued on next page.



Management Initiative 1 (continued)

Increase Organizational Effectiveness and Efficiency

Objective 1.2

Strategic Initiatives

Advance budgeting and financial management capabilities.

Improve financial management and budgeting processes through sound principles, standards, and processes.

Invest in human resources and information technology systems to strengthen and streamline financial management performance.

Strengthen teams, tools, and processes to improve the agency's performance and resolve audit findings.

Performance Measures

Contract implementation ratio (percent)

2016:	2017:	2018:
80	90	100

Conservation quality ratio (percent)

2016:	2017:	2018:
100	100	100



Management Initiative 2

Create a Climate of Inclusion and Foster Diversity So Private Lands Conservation Will Thrive

Performance Outcomes

Improved EEO performance.

Positive American Customer Satisfaction Index score.

Diverse and engaged employees.

Objective 2.1

Strategic Initiatives

Expand opportunities to deliver conservation products and services to new and underserved customers. (Title VI)

Identify and address barriers that limit program participation.

Ensure that customers are treated in accordance with USDA's civil rights policy and applicable legal requirements.

Develop outreach strategies to reach traditionally underserved stakeholders and partners.

Promote programmatic efforts, such as Strike Force, to address conservation needs in economically distressed areas.

Develop and implement a strategic comprehensive communication plan.

Ensure civil rights are protected and responsibilities and duties comply with Title VI in program delivery.

Performance Measures

Percent regulatory complaint findings on civil rights reviews

2016:	2017:	2018:
80	90	100

Percent parity in program application and approval rates

2016:	2017:	2018:
100	100	100



Management Initiative 2 (continued)

Create a Climate of Inclusion and Foster Diversity So Private Lands Conservation Will Thrive

Objective 2.2

Strategic Initiatives

Employ, develop, and retain a highly skilled and diverse workforce. (Title VII)

Develop and deploy agency recruitment and employee development strategies.

Target focused recruitment efforts toward underrepresented populations including women, minorities, people with disabilities, and veterans.

Ensure civil rights are protected and employees comply with Title VII.

Ensure that employees are treated in accordance with USDA's civil rights policy and applicable legal requirements.

Performance Measures

Percent regulatory complaint findings on civil rights reviews

2016:	2017:	2018:
80	90	92

Percent parity in program application and approval rates

2016:	2017:	2018:
93	94	96



Appendix

NRCS Strategic Plan

The strategic plan is the foundation for all agency activities to accomplish core mission and goals, set the direction, and provide a 3 year focus for the agency. It is fluid and flexible while focusing on results and will be used to develop specific short-term strategies in agency annual business plans to meet natural resource challenges and opportunities. The strategic plan is the critical starting point for an integrated budget and performance process.

NRCS' core mission is delivered through four Strategic Goals: 1) Deliver High-Quality Science and Technology for Voluntary Private Lands Conservation, 2) Promote Productive Working Lands and Healthy Waters, 3) Protect and Enhance Agricultural Landscapes, and 4) Support Healthy Watersheds and Diverse Land Use and Communities. These agency goals directly support USDA Strategic Goal 2: Ensure Our National Forests and Private Working Lands are Conserved, Restored, and Made More Resilient to Climate Change, While Enhancing our Water Resources. The NRCS Strategic Goals are supported by two Management Initiatives identified in the Strategic Plan.

NRCS Strategic Planning and Accountability Framework: Primary Components

Planning the work strategically. → Planning the work strategically. → Evaluating the work.

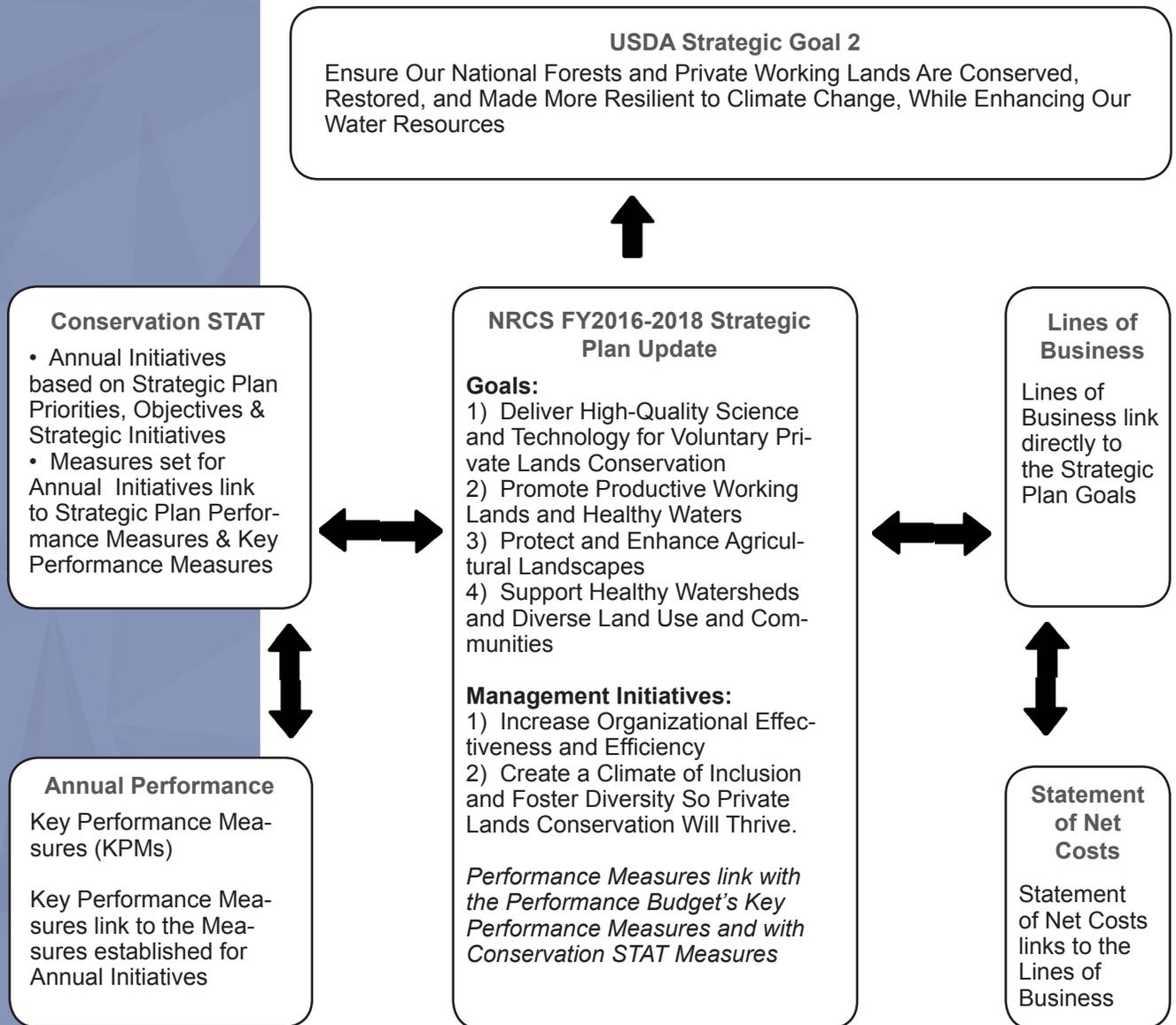


Appendix (continued)

NRCS Strategic Planning and Accountability Framework

Agency work is inclusive of the activities to be conducted (carrying out agency mission) and the funding used to do them (budget). It is an ongoing, cyclical process that considers performance, available resources and critical natural resource conservation needs. Figure 1 is a snapshot of the framework and NRCS management “tools” used to ensure effectiveness and transparency.

Figure 1



Appendix (continued)

Tools and Methods for Strategic Plan Implementation

The objectives and strategic initiatives within NRCS Goals 1 through 4 form the foundation for the high-level implementation strategies. There are eight performance measures to indicate progress toward achieving these goals. The tools and methods for Strategic Plan implementation is as follows:

A. Conservation STAT is the annual business plan at the national level. The Conservation STAT approach enables agency leadership to effectively facilitate the implementation of the Strategic Plan. It identifies the short term specific actions to be completed and measures and monitors progress.

B. Performance measures provide a direct indication of progress toward achieving the Strategic Plan goals and align with measures identified for Goal 2 of the USDA 2014-2018 Strategic Plan. A subset of the performance measures are selected as Key Performance Measures (KPMs) and are used in the Budget and Annual Performance Plan (APP).

C. State Resource Assessments (SRA) provide “bottom-up” input to the agency budget planning and performance process. These needs assessments identify at the local level the natural resource priorities, near-term activities, and the resources needed to implement the Strategic Plan.

D. NRCS’ Six Lines of Business are used by leadership to view costs by groups of similar products and services that Agency employees deliver to customers. The lines of business link to the Strategic Goals and will be used to develop the NRCS statement of net cost.

Tools and Methods

A. Conservation STAT

Conservation STAT is a results-oriented decision-making approach to manage activities designed to solve problems and address challenges in accomplishing the Strategic Goals and Management Initiatives.

Conservation STAT is used as the annual national business plan with cross-functional priorities for the short term that will link directly to the Objectives and Strategic Initiatives in the Strategic Plan and USDA Strategic Goal 2. The specific actions are time-bound and responsible individuals are identified to deliver on annual priorities.

This approach:

- Provides managers with routine, timely data to make informed proactive decisions on necessary adjustments to performance or activities throughout the fiscal year
- Aligns Strategic Plan implementation and annual actions with the budget request, implementation and reporting processes
- Allows for development of annual priorities leading to a collaborative corporate model for improved capacity and future performance
- Aligns the Strategic Plan implementation and annual actions with the requirements of the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010



Appendix (continued)

B. Performance Measures

Performance measures are quantitative indicators of progress in accomplishing NRCS mission goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART). Performance Measures are reported in the annual budget process and the Annual Performance Plan (APP) for which NRCS is held accountable.

NRCS current performance measures represent the aggregated outputs of program funding and conservation activities toward priority resource concerns – soil quality, water quality, range and forest quality, and wildlife habitat.

In addition to the performance measures below NRCS is leading an Agency Priority Goal (APG) in cooperation with the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). The Soil Health APG will improve the health of our Nation's soils to make our food, fiber, and energy production system resilient and sustainable. NRCS in cooperation with the other USDA agencies will continue to implement and monitor progress of modeled science-based practices that improve soil health.

The table below outlines the linkage between the performance measures and the strategic goals and management initiatives.

Table on next page.



Appendix (continued)

Goal	Performance Measure	2016	Programs
1. Deliver High-Quality Science and Technology for Voluntary Private Lands Conservation	Technical standards created, or revised to ensure inclusion of the latest science and technology (number)	CTA: 34	Conservation Technical Assistance Program (CTA), Soil Survey Program, Snow Survey Program, Plant Materials Program
2. Promote Productive Working Lands and Healthy Waters	Cropland with conservation applied to improve soil quality (millions of acres) **	CTA: 5.9 EQIP: 3.0	CTA, Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Agricultural Management Assistance Program (AMA)
	Non-federal land with conservation applied to improve fish and wildlife habitat quality (millions of acres) **	EQIP: 1.1	CTA, EQIP, CSP, RCPP, AMA
	Land with conservation applied to Improve water quality (millions of acres)	CTA: 17.9 EQIP: 12.0	CTA, EQIP, CSP, RCPP, AMA
	Grazing and forest land with conservation applied to protect and improve the resource base (millions of acres) **	CTA: 13.0 EQIP: 13.9	CTA, EQIP, CSP, RCPP, AMA
3. Protect and Enhance Agricultural Landscapes	Land protected by conservation easements (acres)	110,000	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)
4. Support Healthy Watersheds and Diverse Land Use and Communities	Number of watershed rehabilitation supplemental plans authorized (number)	Rehab: 37	Watershed Rehabilitation Program (Rehab)
	Number of dam rehabilitations to be completed (number)	Rehab: 15	Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (PL-566; RCPP)
Management Initiative 1: Increase Organizational Effectiveness and Efficiency	Contract implementation Ratio (percent) ¹	88	All programs
	Conservation Quality Ratio(percent) ^{2*}	86	All programs
Management Initiative 2: Create a Climate of Inclusion and Foster	Regulatory Compliance Findings on Civil Rights Reviews (percent)	80	All programs
Diversity So Private Lands Conservation Will Thrive	Parity in Program Application and Approval Rates (percent)	93	All programs

**New/Proposed Performance Measure*

*** Key Performance Measure*

1The Contract Implementation Ratio (CIR) is an indicator of the quality of conservation planning (decision support), calculated as the ratio of certified contract items over total contract items in a contract.

2 Percent of required spot checked practices that meet standards.



Appendix (continued)

C. State Resource Assessments

The State Resource Assessment (SRA) informs the agency annual budget cycle including performance targets. The SRA provides “bottom-up” input to the agency budget planning and performance process. Through the SRA, States identify for a 3 year period the:

- priority natural resource concerns to be addressed
- priority conservation areas
- type and level of activities needed to address these issues
- amount of operational support resources (funding, staff, equipment, etc.) necessary to accomplish these activities, and
- projected level of performance that will be accomplished with the requested operational resources.

This information is used in preparing the annual budget request, developing funding allocations to states, and formulating performance targets.

D. Lines of Business

The NRCS lines of business provide structure to the process of conservation planning and application that deliver the best possible conservation solutions to individual producers, landowners and managers, partners, communities, and the general public.

1. Conservation Planning and Technical Assistance results in the transfer of data, information, or a conservation plan that helps customers protect and conserve natural resources (soil, water, air, plant, animal, and energy) within their social and economic interests. The planning process identifies natural resource problems and opportunities, determines objectives, inventories resources, analyzes data, and formulates and evaluates alternatives.
2. Conservation Implementation assists operators and landowners with installing conservation treatments, management measures, and management systems that result in improved condition of natural resources. Implementation of landscape-scale approaches and adoption of reengineered processes enhance implementation effectiveness by getting enough conservation applied on the land in a geographic unit to achieve measurable improvements and meet the needs of individuals and local groups. Conservation implementation includes environmental improvement payments and monetary incentives through program contracts, easements, or other means to qualified participants in authorized NRCS conservation programs. Financial assistance helps motivate producers to treat natural resource problems and help sustain natural resources.
3. Natural Resources Inventory is the acquisition and development of natural resource data and information for planning, decision making, and program and policy development at multiple scales. The inventory includes strengthening cooperation with other federal agencies, state agencies, and partners to collect natural resource data. Data is utilized at varying scales and compatible with data generated by other entities.



Appendix (continued)

4. Natural Resources Assessment is the interpretation and delivery of natural resource data and information for planning, decision making, and program and policy development at multiple scales. This includes strengthening cooperation with other Federal agencies, State agencies, and partners to collect natural resource data. Data is utilized at varying scales and compatible with data generated by other entities.

5. Natural Resources Technology Transfer is the acquisition, development, evaluation, and transfer of conservation tools, techniques, and standards. It includes the production and delivery of technical tools used in resource assessment, conservation planning and implementation, conservation standards and guidance documents, and their development and delivery. NRCS focuses on ensuring that appropriate technology is usable and easily accessible to internal and external customers. For internal customers, the highest priority is the integration of field level tools into a user friendly system that better supports the conservation planning process. For external customers, NRCS works to translate science and technology into tools that are easy to understand and use.

6. Conservation Operations are the ongoing cyclical activities involved in managing NRCS to fulfill the mission of helping people help the land. It includes information technology, human resources and services, and financial and operational management. NRCS works to increase reliability and productivity of Agency resources and operations to deliver conservation.



Appendix (continued)

NRCS Partnerships Used for Accomplishing Mission

To accomplish its mission, NRCS works with USDA and other Federal agencies, and with State, Tribal, local, and private partners. This table lists examples of our primary partnerships that will enable NRCS to reach the outcomes set forth in the 2015-2018 Strategic Plan.

Federal Agencies	External Organizations
<p>United States Department of Agriculture –(Agricultural Research Service, Economic Research Service, Farm Service Agency, Foreign Agricultural Service, Forest Service, National Agricultural Statistics Service Office of Budget and Program Analysis, Office of the Chief Economist, Office of the Chief Financial Officer, Office of Civil Rights, Office of the Inspector General), Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Land Management, Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Geological Survey, and Office of Personnel Management</p>	<p>National Association of Conservation Districts, National Association of State Conservation Agencies, National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils (RC&D), National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, 1890s and 1994 colleges/universities, land-grant and other universities and colleges, State soil and water conservation districts, and Tribal governments, American Farm Bureau Federation, American Meat Institute, American Rivers, American Farmland Trust, Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Crowell & Morning, LLP, Defenders of Wildlife, Ducks Unlimited, Environmental Working Group, Environmental Defense, Indiana Conservation Alliance, Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Irrigation Association, National Fish and Wildlife Federation, National Turkey Federation, National Farmers Union, National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, National Cotton Council, National Congress of American Indians, National Milk Producers Federation, Northeast-Midwest Institute, Pollinator Partnership, Restore America’s Estuaries, Sand County Foundation, Federation of Southern Cooperatives, State agencies, Strategic Conservation Solutions, The Fertilizer Institute, The Garrison Group, USA Rice, The Nature Conservancy, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, US Poultry & Egg Association, and United South and Eastern Tribes</p>



Appendix (continued)

Risk Factor Considerations for Achieving Goals

NRCS and its customers work within an environment of risk. Factors beyond the control of NRCS may strongly influence the ability to achieve the goals and objectives stated in the strategic plan. The most influential of these priority external risk factors include:

External Risk Factors

Potential Factor	Potential Impact
Agricultural Economic Forces	The agricultural economy is fluid. Economic incentives to intensify production may work at cross purposes with some conservation objectives. In addition, regardless of operational scale, producer capacity to adopt and fully implement conservation systems is influenced strongly by immediate economic situations.
Weather Extremes	Extreme and prolonged adverse weather events pose challenges to agriculture and conservation. In any given year, climatic factors affect conservation practice demand, implementation, and performance.
Demographic Pressure	Population growth and density increase pressure on the natural resource base. Agricultural lands, water resources, and wildlife are under growing pressure from development as well as increased demand for food. These twin forces have implications for natural resource concerns as well as conservation adoption.
Conservation Funding	Public funding for conservation programs is projected to decline over the next five years, increasing competition and challenging opportunities for larger conservation gains.
Land Tenure	Nearly 40 percent of US farmland is rented, most from non-operator landowners. The nature of lease agreements between landowners and operators has implications for many farm operation decisions, including conservation.
Producer Demographics	The average age and diversity of farmers and ranchers has increased, while the number of women operators and new farmers has fallen. Shifting agricultural demographics has implications for the type and method of delivering effective conservation assistance.
Regulatory Environment	Increasing regulatory requirements at federal, state, and local levels may affect demand for public conservation assistance. Producer concern about regulation may act as a disincentive to participation in conservation programs.





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