

Resource Stewardship Evaluation

Fact Sheet



What is the Resource Stewardship Evaluation?

The Natural Resources Conservation Service's Resource Stewardship Evaluation (RSE) is a new and voluntary service and tool that strengthens and modernizes conservation planning and helps farmers, ranchers and forest landowners better identify and improve their conservation goals and outcomes. Using the web-based Resource Stewardship Evaluation Tool (RSET), it evaluates an operation's current management and conservation activities by benchmarking the operation and comparing it against stewardship thresholds for five overarching natural resource concerns: soil management, water quality, water quantity, air quality and wildlife habitat.

- Soil Management** looks at the health of cropland soil and grazing land resources, which includes reducing erosion, increasing soil organic matter and improving plant health.
- Water Quality** focuses on decreasing nutrient and sediment run-off and reducing pesticide migration.
- Water Quantity** focuses on irrigation and improving water management.
- Air Quality** emphasizes reducing on-farm greenhouse gas emissions.
- Habitat Health** focuses on improving both land and aquatic habitats for wildlife.

How does it work?

The stewardship thresholds are science-based and set by NRCS at levels that maintain the right balance between productive agriculture and healthy natural resources. Resource stewardship includes meeting these thresholds for multiple resource concerns, as illustrated by the vertical blue threshold line in the figure below.



After NRCS uses RSE to evaluate current conservation and management systems against these thresholds, land managers can better understand how their operations perform as a whole, see the value of current conservation efforts and determine areas for improvements. The evaluation results can guide the development of individualized conservation plans that improve performance towards the resource stewardship thresholds.

Overview

Resource Stewardship Evaluation (RSE) is a new and voluntary service in conservation planning that evaluates an operation's current conservation and management practices and compares them against science-based stewardship thresholds for five overarching natural resource concerns that evaluate the health of soil, water quality and quantity, air quality and wildlife habitat.

RSE recognizes the stewardship benefits achieved by farmers, ranchers and forestland owners, identifies conservation opportunities, and better communicates the alternatives offered through conservation planning and science-based conservation practice implementation.

Evaluations are currently available for crop and grazed land (pasture and range). Future updates will also include forestry, farmstead, and whole farm management evaluations. To request an evaluation, please visit your local USDA Service Center to apply or visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/getstarted.

How does RSE affect the conservation planning process?

This new evaluation tool is based on a planning framework that integrates many of NRCS's planning tools into one package and looks holistically at an agricultural operation's current management and conservation activities. The evaluation then compares those results to NRCS's stewardship benchmarks for five natural resource concerns.

By using this tool, NRCS can help answer field-specific questions for a producer, such as:

- How is the operation faring in terms of reducing erosion and increasing soil organic matter?
- How is the operation doing with water management and preventing nutrient run-off?
- What about curbing net greenhouse gas emissions and opportunities for improving habitat for wildlife?

NRCS evaluates the operation for each area and provides the results in an easy-to-read graph showing how producers' decisions affect the well-being of the natural resources under their care. Each individual producer can then see where their operation lies on the spectrum with regard to those specific concerns—whether that's meeting the threshold, exceeding it or identifying opportunities for improvements.

As more countries and corporations require greater use of sustainability metrics from their suppliers, RSE represents an opportunity for producers to quantify and verify their conservation achievements and communicate those achievements to business partners, government agencies, organizations and/or the public. As part of the conservation planning process, this information is protected and can only be shared at the producer's request.

What are the benefits?

For NRCS cooperators, customers and partners, RSE provides an easy-to-read graph of how management decisions affect the well-being of the natural resources under their care. The evaluation is a transparent and verifiable way to show the benefits of existing and planned conservation activities. As such, it is an important decision support tool that assists with the Resource Management Systems (RMS) conservation planning process for conservation planners and landowners. It also helps conservation planners prioritize which natural resource concerns need special attention on each client's operation.

For the private sector, RSE is a beneficial means to encourage good stewardship practices with their suppliers and to highlight their suppliers' sustainability achievements.

NRCS has partnered with the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) to provide joint recognition to farmers and ranchers who are using RSE to improve their operations and to those who have achieved the stewardship thresholds. Please work with your local Conservation District and NRCS office to explore farm and ranch stewardship recognition opportunities.

Who can get an evaluation?

RSEs are available nationwide although not all NRCS staff have been trained yet on delivering them. The nationwide tool currently supports crop and grazed land (pasture and range) evaluations. Future updates will include forestry, farmstead and whole farm management evaluations.

How to apply

Visit your local USDA Service Center to apply or visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/getstarted.

