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Department of
Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Natural Resources Conservation Service

International Programs Division

Annual Report FY 2017

December 6, 2017

About the Report

This annual report has been prepared by the International Programs Division (IPD) of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which is an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The report covers the period from October 1, 2016, to September 30, 2017 (fiscal year 2017).

IPD thanks the following NRCS employees for contributing to this report: Dana ASHFORD-KORNBURGER, Steve BOETGER, Amanda BRAGG, Tim BRASUELL, Ben DOERGE, Rick DUFF, Barry FISHER, Joe FREELAND, Jon FRIPP, Jay FUHRER, Mark GARLAND, David HOOVER, Mike KUCERA, Paul LAKE, Dan LAWSON, Zamir LIBOHOVA, Edwin MUÑIZ, Nathan PARRY, Elizabeth POWERS, Randy RIDDLE, Chayla ROWLEY, Sharon SAWDEY, Linda SCHEFFE, Richard SHAW, Kenneth SPAETH, Carlos SUAREZ, John TIEDEMAN, Karl VISSER, Skye WILLS, and Robert ZIEHR.

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NRCS Rangeland Hydrologist Kenneth Spaeth partnered with the USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) to provide technical assistance during two trips to Kazakhstan, December 2016 and September 2017.

The Kazakh National Agrarian University requested instruction on rangeland hydrology and soil erosion concepts to improve conservation in the Central Asian country.

Photo by Kenneth Spaeth, NRCS



Executive Summary

NRCS IPD facilitated activities in support of U.S. agricultural and foreign policy interests that promote the advancement of science and technology, address food security, strengthen developing economies, and the sustainable management of natural resources.

In fiscal year (FY) 2017, NRCS participated in **72 international engagements** (54 in FY 2016) and strengthened the bilateral relationship with **31 individual countries**.

NRCS staff undertook **42 international travel assignments** to explore and improve conservation efforts in support of USDA and agency priorities. Scientific engagement and collaboration remained strong and accounted for the majority of trips, which included conservation policy meetings with **Canada** to address management of shared water resources, participating in a sustainable agriculture scientific exchange program in **Peru** and **Uruguay**, influencing perspectives by speaking at conferences in **Argentina** (cover crops), **Belgium** (renewable energy technologies), **France** (soil survey), and **Russia** (urban soils), and conducting the agency's first conservation information exchange in **Cuba**.

Agency experts also provided technical assistance by serving as instructors during U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) soil fertility and irrigation workshops in **Pakistan**, assessing rangeland restoration efforts in **Jordan**, advising during a multinational flood response exercise in **Myanmar**, teaching rangeland conservation concepts in **Kazakhstan**, and serving on multiyear residential assignments to support capacity building efforts in the **Federated States of Micronesia** and **Republic of Palau**.

IPD also facilitated **30 foreign delegation visits** for NRCS technical experts and senior executives to meet and engage with **236 foreign visitors**—government officials, scientists, academia—at headquarters and field locations. Aside from bilateral meetings with **Canada** to strengthen regional cooperation, the majority of requests were for presentations to increase institutional knowledge and the exchange of scientific information. NRCS staff conducted briefings or led discussions on a particular topic, such as for delegations from **Brazil** (climate-smart agriculture), **China** (environmental incentive programs), **Indonesia** (greenhouse gas emissions), **Uganda** (soil survey program), and **Ukraine** (direct seeding technologies). Among the requests were also opportunities to conduct presentations for three **multinational delegations**, visiting fellows, as well as candidates from the U.S. State Department's (DOS) International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP).

NRCS Soil Scientist Randy Riddle (left) and France's University of Lorraine Geologist Geoffroy Séré (right) examine a soil profile with a thin surface layer of human-transported materials during a urban soils field tour near Moscow, Russia, May 24, 2017.

Photo by Richard Shaw, NRCS



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During a June 15, 2017, visit, U.S. Ambassador Robert Riley (center) and NRCS Resource Conservationist Sharon Sawdey (right) welcome students from the 2017 Caribbean and Pacific Summer Internship Program to the U.S. Embassy in Kolonia. Sawdey, who is providing long-term technical assistance in the Federated States of Micronesia, provided information regarding food security throughout the islands.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Embassy Kolonia



Acronyms and Initialisms

ARS	Agricultural Research Service
CDFA	California Department of Food and Agriculture
DOS	U.S. Department of State
FAS	Foreign Agricultural Service
FY	Fiscal Year
IPD	International Programs Division
IVLP	International Visitor Leadership Program
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
RUDN	People's Friendship University of Russia
SCEP	U.S.-China Scientific Cooperation Exchange Program
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture

Visiting Cochran Fellows from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan listen to farmer Nathaniel Ensz (right) as he explains soil enrichment principles used on his Saragosa farm in Texas, June 20, 2017.

NRCS staff from Arkansas and Texas provided instruction and facilitated field visits as part of a two-week curriculum hosted by the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff.

Photo by Amanda Bragg, NRCS



Introduction

NRCS has had an international presence and involvement since the 1930s. A full range of activities help foreign governments develop, use, and protect their natural resources, contributing to U.S. foreign policy by promoting economic stability, reducing poverty, and solving world food problems. Furthermore, U.S. domestic agriculture and the agency benefit from access to new technologies, learning best practices, and developing contacts with global stakeholders. NRCS staff regularly participate in international meetings, present findings at conferences, support scientific and technical exchanges, engage in post-disaster recovery assistance, and provide short-term and long-term technical assistance.

Some of the activities, over the previous years, required IPD to facilitate the deployment of more than 65 agricultural advisors to serve—for up to 18 months on [Provincial Reconstruction Teams](#)—in [Afghanistan](#) and [Iraq](#); having scientists present papers and posters at the 20th World Congress of Soil Science in Jeju, [South Korea](#); and having technical experts participate in long-term research collaboration to study frozen desert soils in [Antarctica](#).

Additionally, agency experts also regularly seek out volunteer assignments offered through nongovernmental organizations. These activities are not captured in the IPD Annual Report, but do provide agency staff with additional opportunities to participate in international development projects and gain new experiences.

During a December 2016 trip to Cuba, NRCS scientists visited a state-run organic raised bed operation, which is part of an elaborate production network. Nearly 90 percent of the fresh vegetables that feed Havana's 2+ million population is grown in urban farms and gardens.

Photo courtesy of NRCS



FY 2017 Program Highlights

INFORMATION EXCHANGE: CUBA

Following restored diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba, agriculture served as an important theme for establishing dialogue and building relationships. In March 2016, the USDA and Cuban Ministry of Agriculture signed a memorandum of understanding that identified mutual priorities for cooperation. In line with an established work plan, the USDA agencies Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Agricultural Marketing Service, and NRCS, each conducted separate trips to Cuba.

An interdisciplinary team, consisting of three NRCS scientists, traveled for the [agency's historic trip to Havana](#), December 11-17, 2016. The main purpose of the information exchange with the Cuban Ministry of Agriculture was to [explore soil and forest conservation](#), as well as [agricultural irrigation](#). With the end of the Cold War, Cuba lost access to vital Soviet imports for petroleum, equipment, fertilizer, and main food staples. As a result, the entire agricultural sector—primarily mechanized and sugar cane monoculture—had to transform to accommodate production challenges while simultaneously diversifying food crops.

During the week, several introductory meetings with Cuban officials occurred and agricultural production observed on farms. The field visits, especially to organopónicos (organic raised bed operations) and polygon demonstration areas for small-scale farmers, were great opportunities to learn from more than 25 years of Cuban advancements in organic and urban agriculture.

Following the trip, a readout was shared among USDA stakeholders and IPD hosted an agencywide webinar in which the three NRCS employees shared their observations. Throughout the remainder of FY 2017, IPD continued to collaborate with USDA and DOS to identify potential future engagements for NRCS.

NRCS Agronomist Mike Kucera (right) provides instruction during a Water Evaluation, Testing, and Treatment Workshop, August 23, 2017, at Pakistan's National Agricultural Research Centre in Islamabad.

Kucera and NRCS Civil Engineer Jon Fripp continued to enhance Pakistan's conservation capabilities by conducting training events and advocating science-based solutions.

Photo courtesy of International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas



TRANSBORDER ACTIVITIES: CANADA

Senior-level engagements between USDA and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada further strengthened the bilateral relationship during FY 2017. In November 2016, representatives returned to Washington, DC, to identify priorities and best approaches to mutually address shared agricultural concerns. As a result, **USDA hosted a binational Workshop on Cooperation for Agricultural Resilience**, January 11-12, 2017. NRCS technical experts joined ARS, Forest Service, and National Institute of Food and Agriculture, to support the research collaboration effort, led by USDA's Office of the Chief Scientist. Nearly 40 participants discussed opportunities to help both countries address vulnerabilities of agroecosystems, explore the role of soil biology in resiliency, and identify agroecosystem management practices to strengthen productivity.

Additionally, throughout FY 2017, NRCS staff regularly engaged with Canadian counterparts on various natural resource management matters. These included meetings to discuss plans to reduce phosphorus levels of Lake Erie and establishing standards to monitor human-induced changes across shared ecosystems. Scientists also exchanged information during conferences, professional gatherings, or training events, such as a Soil Health Workshop.

CAPACITY BUILDING: PAKISTAN

As anticipated, NRCS technical experts returned to Pakistan in FY 2017 to **continue improving soil and water conservation efforts**. These multiyear USAID projects are managed by USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) and address various challenges across Pakistan's agricultural sector. Previously, NRCS also strengthened institutional capacities by providing guidance for the development of a national fertilizer policy that utilizes the 4Rs of nutrient stewardship (Right fertilizer, at the Right rate, at the Right time, and in the Right place) and its nexus to soil health management. NRCS also contributed through dissemination of improved water management practices through the watershed rehabilitation project.

In FY 2017, **NRCS provided technical assistance during four trips**. Meetings with Pakistani agricultural officials focused on adoption of water management techniques for rain-fed and irrigated areas, reviewing public sector soil education resources, and contributing to the development and publication of a soil fertility atlas. Additionally, NRCS provided instruction during a series of soil and water conservation workshops. A soil health and fertility workshop taught participants field assessment techniques and demonstrated the connection to soil health and fertility management measures. During the water quality workshop, participants were trained on identifying the source and type of water pollution, best management practices, water quality testing, and water treatment methods.

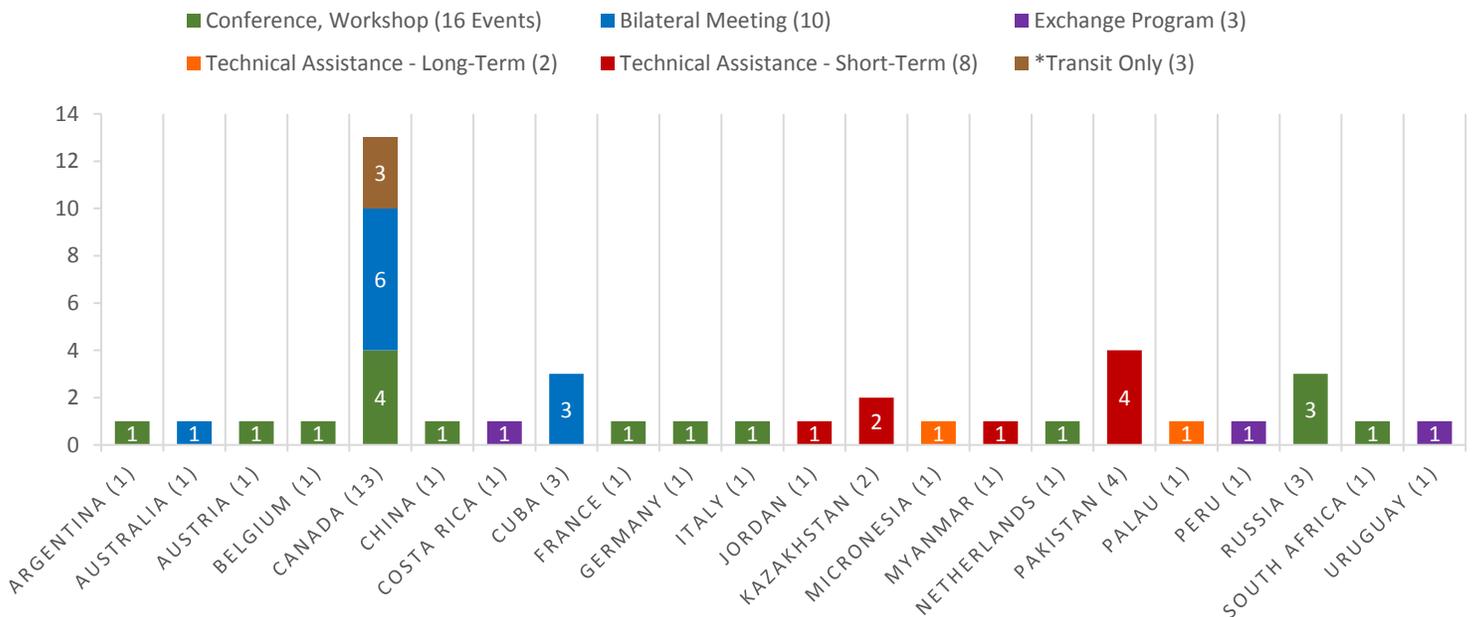
By the Numbers

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

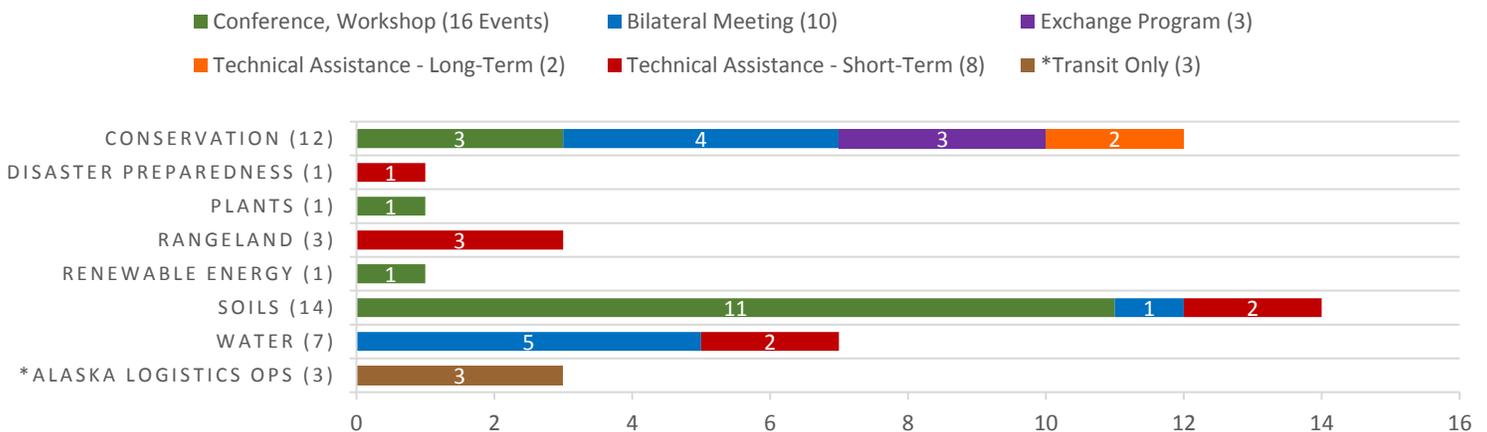
NRCS employees participated in **42 international travel assignments** in FY 2017, taking them to **22 different countries**. The majority of the trips were to **Canada** (13), followed by **Pakistan** (4), **Cuba** (3), and **Russia** (3). Two employees also remained posted overseas on multiyear residential assignments in the **Federated States of Micronesia** and **Republic of Palau**.

These 42 assignments provided NRCS employees the opportunity to primarily engage in the scientific exchange of information, by participating in **16 conferences** and **10 bilateral meetings**. Participation in **three exchange programs** provided employees with a more in-depth learning experience. Overall, **soils** (14) and **general conservation** (12) were the most popular topics.

42 INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL ASSIGNMENTS



GENERAL TOPICS OF TRAVEL ASSIGNMENTS



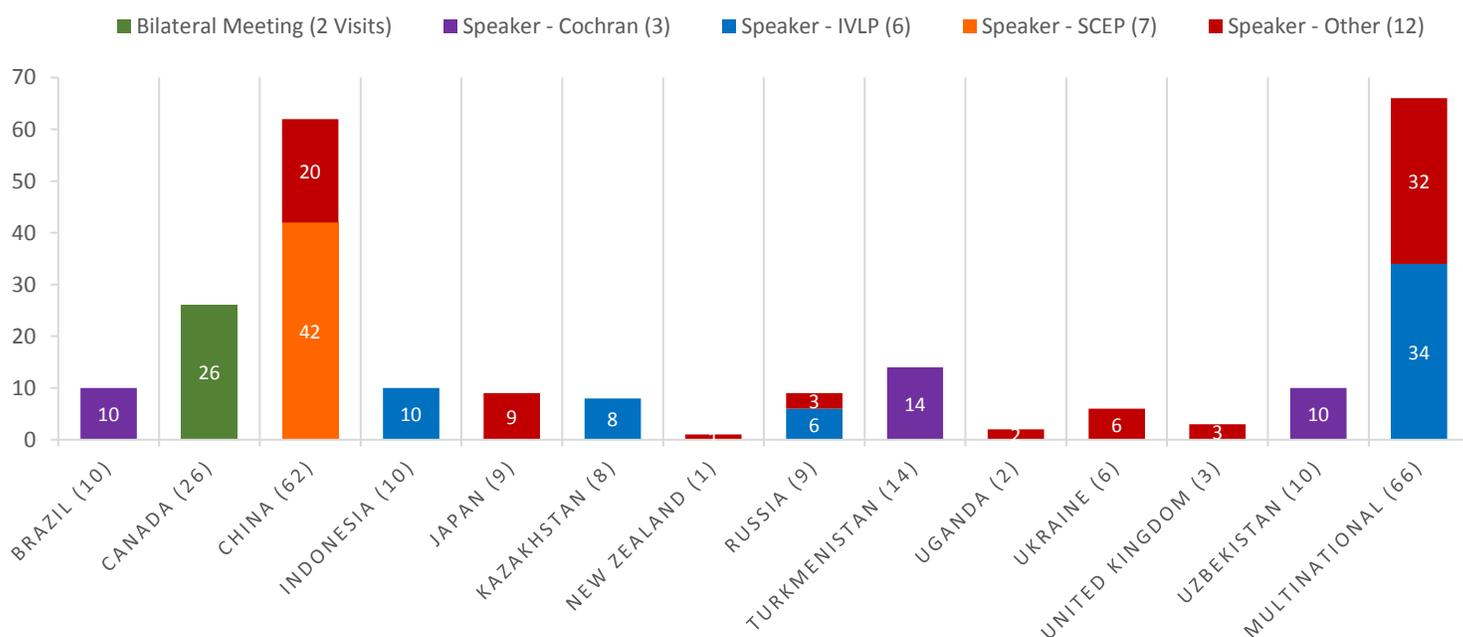
FOREIGN VISITORS

In FY 2017, IPD supported **30 requests** for NRCS employees to meet with **236 foreign visitors**. These engagements were primarily for presentations and sharing of scientific and technical information, as part of speaker requests or in support of a particular program, such as the IVLP.

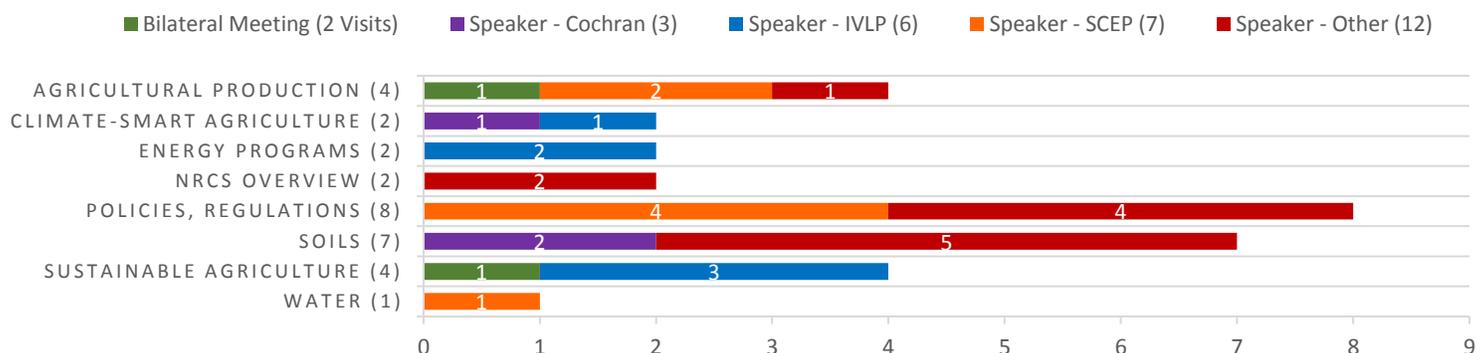
The agency maintains an outstanding international reputation and is continuously sought out by foreign officials for guidance and sharing of information. Requests for presentations and scientific cooperation were submitted on behalf of **13 foreign countries**, with the majority of visitors coming from **China** (62, with 42 as part of an exchange program) and **Canada** (26). On three occasions, NRCS subject matter experts also supported presentation requests for **multinational delegations** (two for IVLP, one for the U.S. Soybean Export Council).

In FY 2017, **soils** (9) and **overviews of conservation policies and regulations** (8) were the most popular topics for the foreign visits.

30 FOREIGN VISITS / 236 FOREIGN VISITORS



GENERAL TOPICS OF FOREIGN VISITS



FOREIGN COUNTRY VOLUNTEERS

In FY 2017, NRCS also supported requests to host **five volunteers** from foreign countries. The cooperative arrangement allows foreign nationals to gain valuable field experience in conservation, while providing the agency numerous hours of service in return. The five volunteers came from **Hungary, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia, and Ukraine**.

NRCS EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION

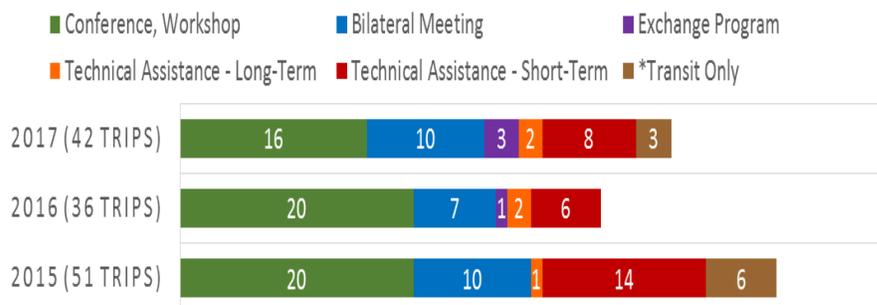
In total, **34 employees** traveled to support the **42 international travel assignments**, with ten employees traveling for the first time for NRCS. In FY 2017, 27 employees traveled once, six employees traveled twice, and one employee traveled three times.

The **30 foreign visits** were supported by **50 NRCS employees** throughout the USA. Of those visits, 28 were for presentations or educational in nature. This allowed 15 technical experts to serve as the sole presenter on 17 occasions and reach 139 foreign visitors. The remaining visits had multiple NRCS speakers.

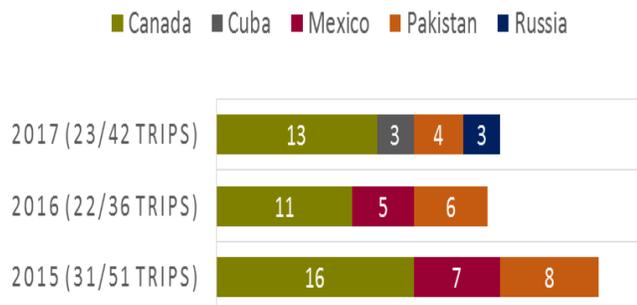
YEARLY COMPARISONS

Following charts provide statistics on NRCS international activities for the last 3 fiscal years.

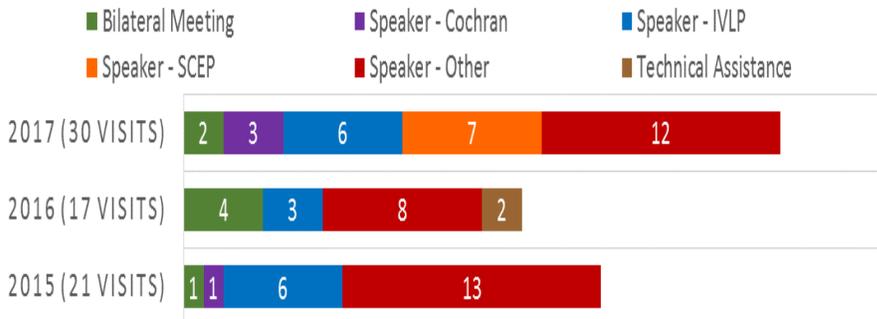
INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL ASSIGNMENTS PER YEAR



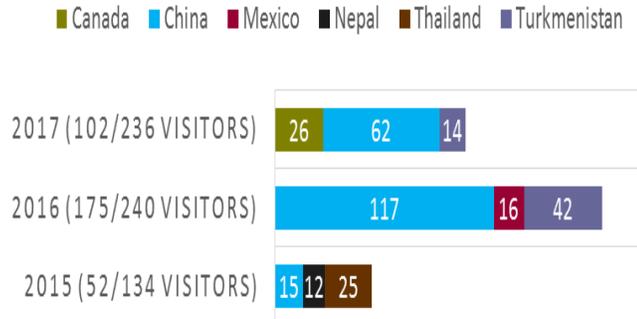
MOST TRAVELED COUNTRIES PER YEAR



FOREIGN VISITS PER YEAR



MOST VISITORS PER YEAR



Following his earlier conference presentation, NRCS Soil Health Specialist Jay Fuhrer (left) elaborates further on conservation planning during a spontaneous side discussion.

Fuhrer accepted an invitation to speak about the integration of cover crops and livestock into production systems, during the 7th World Congress on Conservation Agriculture, August 1-4, in Rosario, Argentina.

Photo courtesy of Jay Fuhrer, NRCS



Selection of Country Activity Reports

NRCS supported **72 international engagements** during FY 2017, which included conferences, meetings, exchange programs, and technical assistance activities. Below are brief summaries describing bilateral interactions with select countries, as well as multilateral activities, for example, participation in an international conference. Contact IPD for more information or to learn about activities in other countries not specifically mentioned in this report.

AUSTRALIA

The NRCS California State conservationist accompanied an agriculture policy delegation, led by the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA), to Australia. The climate of New South Wales is similar to California and agricultural producers are confronted with some of the same challenges. During the week-long trip, March 17-25, Australian officials shared information about their water management policies, soil health, and carbon farming. A visit to a **multinational corporation's fairly new \$70 million hazelnut operation** further demonstrated successful incorporation of climate-smart soil and water conservation technologies, as well as recommendations for building stronger value chains.

In an effort to promote California's agriculture and seek innovative solutions to production challenges, CDFA regularly leads delegations to foreign countries. Fortunately, NRCS was presented the opportunity to participate in visits to **Israel** and the **Netherlands** in previous years.

BRAZIL

The national leader for the **USDA Climate Hubs**, detailed for 2 years from NRCS, provided **Cochran Fellows** from Brazil with an overview of the concept of the hubs and their purpose in providing various customers with region-specific information, August 9. The Brazilians were participating in a 2-week trip, organized by the University of Minnesota, to enhance their understanding of climate-smart agriculture. As part of the curriculum, the fellows visited the USDA Northern Plains Climate Hub in Fort Collins, CO, before continuing on to other locations. NRCS, along with other agencies, contribute in a collaborative effort to the ten regional climate hubs.

Researchers familiarize themselves with electromagnetic induction equipment and test performance on a mango plantation.

NRCS Assistant State Soil Scientist Edwin Muñiz (not in the picture) provided training on data collection and analysis, as part of a precision agriculture scientific exchange in Costa Rica, September 24-29.

Photo by Edwin Muñiz, NRCS



CHINA

NRCS continued to have frequent engagements with officials from China during FY 2017. In particular, speaker requests to meet with visiting Chinese delegations accounted, as in the previous year, again for the majority of visitors from a single country, 62.

As part of USDA's U.S.-China Scientific Cooperation Exchange Program (SCEP), NRCS met with visiting representatives from China's Ministry of Agriculture. Throughout the year, agency technical experts informed seven SCEP delegations at the Washington, DC, headquarters, about a variety of topics, such as regulatory systems and policies to promote conservation, precision agriculture, crop rotation, and water conservation. The SCEP provided NRCS the opportunity to increase awareness and facilitate discussions among 42 officials from China's Ministry of Agriculture.

NRCS field staff also supported visitation requests, welcoming Chinese delegations at NRCS state offices in California and New Jersey. These opportunities provided discussions on use of financial subsidies and ecological compensation, which are of interest to the Chinese as they continue to implement stronger environmental protection policies.

Additionally, a NRCS Botanist participated in the Nomenclature Section of the 19th International Botanical Congress, in Shenzhen, July 17-21. Setting the rules for the next 6 years, specialists reviewed and voted on nearly 400 proposals related to the scientific naming convention used by taxonomists to identify groups of fungi, algae, and plants.

ITALY

A NRCS Soil Scientist joined the more than 450 attendees of the Global Soil Organic Carbon Symposium for an information exchange, held at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome, March 21-23. The participants shared research related to direct and indirect benefits of properly managing and increasing soil organic carbon. A parallel session provided the NRCS employee the opportunity to inform about the agency's Rapid Carbon Assessment Project and how it is used to estimate soil carbon stocks in the USA. The symposium was organized by the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils of the United Nations Global Soil Partnership. Throughout the years, other NRCS scientists have contributed to the work of the partnership.

NRCS Plant Materials Specialist Robert Ziehr accompanied a small team, led by FAS, to the Badia region of Jordan.

The trip, January 26 – February 8, 2017, gave NRCS the opportunity to provide a preliminary assessment of rangeland restoration efforts of the Jordanian Ministry of Agriculture, such as at a reserve with security patrols to prevent unauthorized grazing.

Photo by Robert Ziehr, NRCS



KAZAKHSTAN

A NRCS Rangeland Hydrologist collaborated with scientists from ARS for a technology exchange with the [Kazakh National Agrarian University](#). During a 1-week trip, December 10-17, the team provided classroom instruction at the university in Almaty on ecological site descriptions, monitoring protocols, rangeland health, as well as introduce the [USDA's Rangeland Hydrology and Erosion Model](#). A follow-on 2-week trip took place September 10-24 and focused heavily on field training in four separate regions of Kazakhstan. The students learned about resource inventory methods, data collection, and grazing management.

The September trip also included meetings at the Ministry of Agriculture in Astana. This allowed the USDA Team to provide a variety of recommendations that incorporate scientific data to improve the health of Kazakhstan's rangelands. During meetings with [Kazakhstan's Minister of Agriculture](#), the visiting technical experts shared many of the foundational aspects of conservation in the United States, emphasizing the advantages of a soil survey program, the National Resources Inventory process, and the purpose of conservation districts and extension offices.

Also, as part of the DOS [IVLP](#), a four-person delegation received presentations during a trip to the USA. NRCS staff met with the group to discuss sustainable agriculture during meetings on May 16, in Washington, DC, as well as on May 18, at Purdue University.

MYANMAR

In support of an interagency request, an NRCS civil engineer served as the agricultural expert during a [multinational disaster response exercise](#), in Naypyitaw, December 6-9. The Disaster Response Exercise and Exchange is an annual engagement that is co-organized by U.S. Army Pacific and another member of the six-country [Lower Mekong Initiative](#). More than 140 government officials from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and the U.S., gathered for table-top exercises and presentations related to overtopping dams and flooding in the Lower Mekong Basin. The NRCS employee introduced the [nine-step conservation planning process](#) and provided opportunities for officials to analyze and discuss various scenarios. Overall, the incorporation of natural resource conservation during the exercise allowed participants to improve disaster preparedness and increase resiliency of agricultural landscapes.

NRCS Resource Conservationist Paul Lake (left) provides instruction on soil health principles for local farmers, in Melekeok State, Palau, February 11, 2017.

The Palau Conservation Society workshop on “Reviving Traditional Croplands to Improve Community Climate Resilience” was funded by USAID’s Pacific-American Climate Fund. Photo courtesy of Paul Lake, NRCS



RUSSIA

Scientific cooperation with Russia, in particular the [People’s Friendship University of Russia \(RUDN\)](#), provided NRCS with unique opportunities to share information and interact with a variety of researchers in FY 2017. Two NRCS Soil Scientists attended the [9th Soils of Urban, Industrial, Traffic, Mining and Military Areas Conference](#), held in Moscow, May 22-26. More than 200 international scientists gathered for keynote speeches, presentations, and discussions related to urbanization, which served as the guiding theme. Both employees also contributed to the scientific dialogue by giving individual presentations about the soil survey of Los Angeles County and carbon stocks in New York City soils. RUDN, as the conference host, also organized a day-long field tour of New Moscow. The new district provided opportunities to observe the integration of various conservation efforts into urban construction, such as storm water management, rooftop gardens, and park areas.

One of the scientists also supported a request from RUDN and arrived earlier in order to serve as an instructor during the preconference “Monitoring, Modeling and Managing Urban Soils” summer school, May 18-21. This opportunity developed after RUDN faculty visited the USA in March and received presentations from NRCS about soil survey and urban conservation efforts.

Another NRCS soil scientist traveled to Moscow to participate in the RUDN-sponsored [Global Soil Map Conference](#), July 4-6. Nearly 50 international researchers collaborated and shared progress on the development of soil property maps.

In addition, NRCS also supported a speaker request to meet with six conservation officials from Russia, April 5, in Washington, DC. During the meeting, the foreign delegation received information related to sustainable agriculture and the USDA Climate Hubs. This request was in support of the [IVLP](#) of the DOS.

UGANDA

Two researchers from Uganda visited the [NRCS National Soil Survey Center](#) in Lincoln, NE, January 13. As part of a full-day schedule, NRCS technical experts discussed several topics, such as the benefits of a national soil survey program or ecological investigations. A tour of the national soil survey laboratory was also provided. This engagement was requested by Iowa State University’s Center for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods.

Division Operations

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Throughout FY 2017, IPD evaluated policies and procedures to improve the overall efficiency and management of the agency's international activities. This included ongoing coordination with FAS, other sister agencies of USDA, and interagency partners, to synchronize operations. Additionally, IPD provided agency staff with new or updated guidance and hosted two webinars to further increase awareness about international activities.

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL PROGRAM

IPD's International Travel Program provides a range of support functions that enable agency employees to conduct official U.S. Government business in foreign countries. This includes obtaining official passports and visas to undertake travel, requesting country clearances from U.S. Embassies, and providing guidance on additional topics, such as traveling with electronic devices, medical evacuation policy, mandatory security training, or inoculations.

COMMUNICATION PRODUCTS

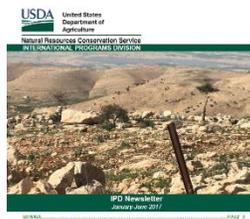
Seven national bulletins were prepared and released in FY 2017:

- International Assignment Candidates Database ([NB 280-17-1](#))
- Engagement with Cuba ([NB 280-17-2](#))
- Meeting with Foreign Visitors ([NB 280-17-3](#))
- International Programs Division FY 2016 Annual Report ([NB 280-17-4](#))
- Webinar on NRCS Exchange Visit to Cuba ([NB 280-17-5](#))
- Reminder of Mandatory Training for International Travel ([NB 280-17-6](#))
- Webinar on Providing International Technical Assistance ([NB 280-17-7](#))

Two editions of the IPD Newsletter were distributed during FY 2017. The biannual publication covered July-December 2016 and January-June 2017.



[January 2017 edition](#)



[July 2017 edition](#)

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