

Forest Management Plan – Fact Sheet

Part 1 – Plan Development

Vermont Conservation Activity Plan (CAP)

106

Plan Components:

A NRCS Forest Management Conservation Activity Plan (CAP) 106 takes into consideration forest management and health, wildlife habitat, water quality, wetlands, soil quality, cultural resources, recreation opportunities and aesthetics. It is also intended to locate and identify one or more “resource concerns” or problems on the land. Examples of resource concerns include lack of desired habitat, invasive plants, soil erosion, sedimentation in water bodies, etc. *The NRCS Forest Plan is intended to identify and to recommend NRCS conservation practices to address resource concerns found during the planning process.* The requirements of the plan will include the typical stand inventory, description and silvicultural prescriptions as would be required from the State of Vermont’s Use Value Appraisal (UVA) Program. In fact, many of the requirements of the NRCS Forest Plan come from the UVA manual. When the NRCS Forest Management Plan – Vermont Conservation Activity Plan Checklist 106 is followed, the plan should meet both NRCS and UVA requirements. But, remember that the County Forester has the final approval authority on UVA plans.

The map requirements on the NRCS Forest Plans will not meet the requirements of the UVA program unless your forester provides the additional information needed to meet the UVA map standards. A UVA plan that meets only the requirements of the UVA program will not meet the intent of a NRCS Forest Plan.

Plan Resource Inventory and Evaluation

NRCS Forest Plans are intended to not only meet UVA requirements by having a solid silviculture component but also to provide an in-depth inventory and review of important resources on the property. Recommendations should be made to protect these resources through long range silvicultural objectives as well as prescriptions. A good starting point for this resource inventory is to do a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) analysis looking at all pertinent available layers. All of the key GIS layers (and many more) are available through the ANR Natural Resources Atlas which is an online (internet based) mapping tool. Note that there is a help video available that can be accessed from the site. The website is: <https://anrmaps.vermont.gov/websites/anra5/>.

Some of the key layers include rare, threatened and endangered species, significant natural communities, uncommon species, Indiana bat layers, habitat blocks, wetlands, deer wintering areas, waterbodies, streams, soils, etc. The fish and wildlife layers including the natural community layers will require additional investigation. The Wildlife Diversity Program of the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife (FWD) maintains the data and can inform landowners or foresters about what the occurrences are on their property (actual species or community) and how to protect the resource. For the CAP plans, even polygons found just off the parcel should be investigated to determine if there is any potential effect on the species/community due to management on the parcel under forest management. Be sure to review and evaluate these GIS layers prior to finalizing the plan. This information will help ensure resource protection or conservation. Initial contacts should be directed to Everett Marshall of FWD at everett.marshall@vermont.gov or 802-371-7333.

Plan Review Process - Quality Assurance

After a forester has become a certified TSP, Vermont NRCS will review the first two NRCS Forest Plans written as part of the quality assurance process. Plans should be emailed, prior to landowner signing (as edits typically required), to Toby Alexander at NRCS – toby.alexander@usda.gov. The plans will get an in-depth review to be sure the plan meets the VT NRCS Forest Plan Checklist. A listing of revisions and comments will be sent back to the TSP forester usually via email. This is a separate review process from the UVA review by the county forester but there will likely be similar requirements if deficiencies are noted in the stand descriptions or prescriptions.

A number of plans have been reviewed and there are some common issues found. In regards to UVA, the most common problems encountered are incomplete long range silvicultural objectives and/or stand prescriptions/treatments. Be sure to review the 2010 UVA Manual Management Plan Checklist Appendix G. This is a good reference to be sure all necessary information has been included.

In regards to NRCS Forest Plans, some of the common problems are as follows.

- Incomplete soils information may only include soil series name in the stand. Key characters of the soils, in relation to forest management, need to be described. Do the soils pose challenges to harvesting and how will they be protected (timing of harvest)? Are they prone to drought or restrict rooting depth (shallow to bedrock, restrictive layer, high water table)? Are they poor or rich soils? How do they relate to productivity on the site?
- Missing important resources on the parcel mapped in GIS. Wetlands, Deer Wintering Areas, RTE Species & Natural Communities, etc. Be sure to look at ANR Atlas for the planning area and properly describe important resources.
- Vague descriptions of how important resources would be protected. For instance, ‘wetland or stream will be buffered.’ It should be a specific recommendation such as ‘the stream will have a 50 foot buffer area where 75% canopy cover will be maintained. Harvesting will be limited to areas with well drained soils.’
- Not describing wildlife habitat on the property. Even on very small and seemingly uninteresting properties there is opportunity for habitat recognition or improvement. Depending upon the landowner’s objectives, provide at least some information about the existing habitat on the property and ideas for improvements.
 - Unique or important habitats to Note: Wetlands, streams, waterbodies, seeps/vernal pools, cliffs/ledges, softwood forests/inclusions, large cavity/nest trees, young forest, old forest, unique plant communities, old orchards, early successional areas, important hard mast areas (oak, hickory, beech) or soft mast (apple, serviceberry, dogwood, cherry, blackberry, etc.).
- No integration between important resources on the property and silvicultural prescriptions. Even when numerous resources of interest are identified, the prescription will often be strictly silvicultural with no additional recommendations to benefit these resources or to interpret how this treatment will affect other resources. It is key for foresters to highlight the positive or negative effects of forestry on some of the more important resources so that the landowner attains a better understanding of good stewardship and can make informed decisions.
 - For example, a stand may have a deer wintering area which is described in the stand description. The landowner may have a co-objective of wildlife habitat. The silvicultural prescription for the stand does not even mention these resources. For deer wintering areas it could recommend maintaining at least some travel lanes (see green book) where higher basal area crown closure will be maintained.
 - Or, if there is a significant wetland, the prescription could note that harvesting near the wetland will avoid wet areas, maintain crown closure and coarse woody debris for amphibians.
 - Or, when uneven-aged prescriptions are recommended the forester could also note that this will improve habitat for forest songbirds by providing a multi-structured forest and additional browse for deer, moose, and hare.
 - Or, crop tree release will not only improve standing timber but will also increase mast sources for wildlife as a larger crown will produce more seed/fruit.

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Part 2 – Application, Contracts, Funding and TSPs

Vermont Conservation Activity Plan (CAP) 106

Application:

Landowners will need to work with their local USDA Service Center to establish eligibility and parcel boundaries and to submit an application for a NRCS Forest Management Conservation Activity Plan (CAP) 106 Plan. When the application has been approved then a contract is developed between NRCS and the landowner. The contract document is then signed by the landowner and NRCS representative which sets aside funds for the landowner to complete the plan within a year. The amount of the actual contract is based on the average cost to develop a plan for a parcel within a particular acreage range. These payments, set nationally, are not intended to cover the entire cost of plan development. The landowners out of pocket expense will be based solely on the difference between the foresters' bill for the services they provide and the contract payment. It is recommended that the landowner discuss with their forester what the cost will be for developing their plan so that the landowner understands what their out of pocket expense will be.

Note that payments for NRCS Forest Plans and other NRCS practices are considered taxable income so landowners will be receiving a 1099 at the end of the year they received payments. Some practices may be eligible for exemptions but NRCS cannot advise on this matter. Landowners will need to work with their accountant or tax preparer.

Existing State of Vermont Use Value Appraisal (UVA) forest plans that are in need of the 10 year update can apply for an NRCS Forest Management Plan when they are around 2 years of the required update deadline.

CAP or UVA:

It is very important for landowners to inform their forester that they have a contract with USDA NRCS to complete a NRCS Forest Plan. This is a critical point as the NRCS Forest Plans are much more involved than the more commonly developed UVA Forest Plan. More time will be required for resource inventory and plan development. The NRCS Forest Plan must meet the criteria detailed in the Forest Management Plan – Vermont Conservation Activity Plan Checklist 106. The VT NRCS CAP Forest Plan checklist can be found at the following URL:

<http://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/references/public/VT/CAP106VTchklist.pdf>

Contract Signing and Starting the Plan:

The NRCS Forest Plan MUST NOT be started (including field inventory) until there is a signed contract between NRCS and the landowner. Submitting an application is not considered a contract. If the forest plan is started prior to the landowner signing a contract the applicant and application will be ineligible for funding. It does not matter if the plan is also being used for UVA purposes. **NRCS considers the field inventory (timber cruise) as a key part of the plan so it cannot be started prior to contract signing.** Landowners with even a partially completed UVA plan (e.g. ½ the inventory is completed and the plan document not started) are not eligible to apply for a NRCS Forest Plan as the inventory is a major component of these and any forest plan. Waivers to start the plan prior to the contract being awarded cannot be granted.

If the NRCS Forest Plan is also intended to meet UVA, it may be necessary to apply 1-2 years prior to the UVA deadline. This is because NRCS and UVA programs and deadlines are very different and not in sync. For example, if a UVA plan is due in April of 2022 then it may be necessary to apply for a NRCS Forest Plan in October of 2020. Assuming a contract is awarded to the landowner by March of 2021, this time period would allow the forester to complete the inventory during the following growing season (generally a favorable time) and write the plan in the fall/winter so that the plan is completed by March 2022. See NRCS Program website for updated Application and Batching Deadlines.

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/vt/programs/financial/equip/>

Plan Development by TSPs:

Only private Technical Service Provider (TSP) foresters, or foresters within an organization with certified TSP foresters, may write the NRCS Forest Plans for landowners. A list of TSP foresters approved to write NRCS Forest Plans for Vermont is available through the National NRCS or the TechReg website.

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/technical/tsp/>

Non TSP foresters may write NRCS Forest Plans so long as the plans are certified and signed for by a certified TSP forester. The TSP certified forester will have their name on the plan as being the responsible party that is certifying that the plan meets the minimum requirements. If there are any ongoing problems with these plans, it is the TSP forester's certification that is in jeopardy. NRCS has no tie-in with the Non TSP forester so cannot hold them responsible. While Non TSP foresters may submit plans reviewed and signed by TSP foresters, the first two NRCS Forest Plans submitted by the TSP to NRCS must be completed and submitted by the actual TSP. This is Vermont's process for Quality Assurance (QA). See the Forest Management Plan – Fact Sheet Part 1 – Plan Development for additional information about the QA process.

Approval and Payment:

Upon completion of the plan, the TSP will approve and sign the plan and sign the CAP checklist to indicate that it meets NRCS standards. The checklist and completed plan (including full plan document, maps, etc.) will then be sent to NRCS who will process the contract payment to the landowner. The funds will be direct deposited into the landowner's bank account.

Note that TSP approval of the CAP plans does NOT constitute approval of the Forest Plan for UVA. Only the County Forester may approve the plan for the UVA program. Should changes be required by the County Forester for initial plan approval, then the updated plan should also be re-submitted to NRCS. Future amendments including changes in ownership, salvage harvests, etc. do not need to be sent to NRCS following initial plan approval by the County Forester.