Overview

What are Cultural Resources?

Cultural resources are broadly defined as the traces of past human activities. They include prehistoric and historic artifacts like arrowheads, pottery and glassware; and archaeological sites, buildings and structures like bridges and canals. Cultural resources also encompass places or properties that are of traditional importance to a group of people, such as the sacred sites of Native American tribes.

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, Section 106 requires all federal agencies — including Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)—to consider the effects of agency activities on significant cultural resources and to do so early in project planning.

Why Does NRCS Care About Cultural Resources?

Resource Conservation:

The NRCS protects cultural resources for the same reason it protects natural resources—the soil, water, air, plants and animals—on properties where conservation assistance is applied. Keeping natural resources in balance helps provide the basis for a healthy and profitable farm or ranch environment. Similarly, protecting and interpreting significant cultural resources provides the basis for understanding our human past. We are all stewards of the soil and water on our property, the organisms that inhabit it, and the heritage information that it contains.

It is the Law:

Recognizing the importance of our cultural heritage, Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) in 1966. The NHPA establishes a policy for protecting significant cultural resources (also called historic properties). The NHPA requires Federal agencies to consider historic properties in their activities, and to determine whether historic properties will be affected by those activities.

Nationally, the NRCS has established procedures for training its Conservation Planners and Partners to complete limited field reviews and recognize some cultural resources during conservation planning. This helps ensure that cultural resources are protected during earth-disturbing conservation activities. In addition, the NRCS has Cultural Resources Specialists (CRS) to help provide additional assistance when cultural resources are identified within NRCS project areas.

NRCS Procedures for Cultural Resources Protection

The NRCS seeks to identify, evaluate, and avoid causing impacts to cultural resources through a process that takes approximately 4-6 months. Projects utilizing NRCS funding to implement an activity in a conservation plan must follow these general procedures:
Cultural Resources and Your Conservation Plan

1: Decide whether proposed conservation activities are earth disturbing. Activities that involve seemingly minimal earth disturbance may have the potential to affect cultural resources.

2: Determine the entire area that will be affected during implementation of conservation activities. This can include the area where activities are planned, but it can also include additional areas for such activities as equipment staging and material borrowing.

3: Examine the area for evidence of cultural resources. If cultural resources are found, NRCS cultural resources personnel may visit the project site to help determine the extent of the cultural resource and whether it qualifies as a historic property.

4: Avoid cultural resources that are present. This may involve moving the location of conservation activities or selecting a different, non-destructive conservation activity. Cultural resources can generally be avoided if they are found on projects receiving assistance from the NRCS.

What to Do if You Find Cultural Resources on Your Property?

If you uncover artifacts or building foundations during construction, you must instruct the contractor to stop work immediately and contact NRCS. The NRCS conservationist will take steps to protect the site until it can be evaluated for significance.

Can You Keep Them?

If you own the land, artifacts from archaeological sites and historic buildings on the property belong to you. However, Federal assistance or funding cannot be received if cultural resources are intentionally disturbed or removed to avoid compliance with historic preservation laws and policies.

What Rules Apply to Human Remains?

Most states have laws that protect human burials and their associated objects. If you encounter human remains or associated artifacts, contact local or State Police immediately and notify NRCS.

The Environmental Evaluation Process

01 Application is completed and submitted  
02 Agreement is funded  
03 NRCS begins the Environmental Evaluation  
04 NRCS conducts a Section 106 Review  
05 NRCS completes the Environmental Evaluation  
06 Conservation Plan is implemented

Additional Information
For more information about Cultural Resources, contact the NRCS at a local USDA Service Center.

www.nrcs.usda.gov
Natural Resources Conservation Service
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