

Communicating Strategically

A Toolkit for Conservation Planners



Communicating Effectively and Efficiently

Maintaining transparency and effective communications with people regarding the actions, progress, and success of applying conservation practices to the landscape can be challenging and perhaps overwhelming.

Taking some time at the beginning of a project for planning a Communications Strategy with those involved with the project to ensure success at the project close. That plan will help project managers to prioritize ideas into actions for the most efficient method to reach your target audience effectively.

The Project Proposals of the Conservation Implementation Strategy (CIS) of South Dakota's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and our partners provides excellent situations of improving the resources that should be communicated to many audiences. For the planning task of developing an effective and efficient Communications Strategy, the situation analysis and background are mostly already contained in the CIS proposals.

As a CIS project is accepted and progresses toward implementation, the NRCS SD Public Affairs developed this toolkit to help local project managers and their partners to form a plan with identified actions. The objective is that at the close of the CIS project, there is clear documentation of its success and the pertinent people know about that success--time for a celebration!

Communicating Strategically

Getting Started

This toolkit includes an introduction to the principles of communications planning and how to begin using them.

7 About how many times a consumer must hear a message for it to register.

5 How many different sources a consumer must hear a message from in order to trust it.

2 Number of people or parties needed to communicate.

For questions or feedback during your project, please reach out to these individuals:

South Dakota Public Affairs:

Shared email:
SM.FPAC.NRCS.SD.PublicAffairs@usda.gov

Public Affairs Staff:

Vacant, Public Affairs Officer
Phone: (605) 352-1200

Rachel Giles, Public Affairs Specialist
rachel.giles@usda.gov
Cell phone/text: (605) 570-2622

Andrew Thomason, Public Affairs Specialist
andrew.thomason@usda.gov
Cell phone/text: (605) 570-2625

Locally Led Conservation Staff:

Blaine Brakke
SDACD Resource Concerns
Locally Led Project Coordinator
blaine.brakke@sdconservation.net
Cell phone/text: (605) 280-4813

Caitlin Uthe
SDACD Communications Coordinator
caitlin.uth@sdconservation.net
Cell phone/text: (605) 280-3949

Communicating Strategically

Creating a Communication Plan

Knowing the objective behind creating a communications plan will help project managers to identify what we want people to know before we design and implement a detailed plan. Objectives help maintain focus on desired outcomes and allow us to know if we achieve what we set out to achieve.

A Communications Strategy with:

**Clear Goals and Objectives
+ Target Audience
+ Right Mix of Strategies and Tactics
= Success!**



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Define the current situation—what’s needed and why? What will happen if the issue is not addressed? Providing any relevant history that supports Communications Planning. pg 6

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What is our mission? What are you seeking to accomplish and why? Are there benefits or features now or forthcoming? Are they measureable? pg 7

Audiences

Define as narrowly as possible, including individual internal and external audiences. Understand audiences to target them appropriately. What demographics are available? pg 8-9

Research

What do you know and what don’t you know about the targeted audience (regarding perceptions, attitudes, barriers to participation, etc.) that you need to know in order to be successful? pg 10

Strategy

Define specific approaches, opportunities, or strategies, both internal and external. Who are the decision-makers in this situation? pg 11

Key Messages

What do you want the intended audiences to know or do? What is the call to action? Priority messages? Do our messages resonate with our target audiences? pg 12

Tactics (Products or Tasks) and Costs

Tailor products to the behaviors and values of your audience. How do your target audiences get to information? What tools make sense (events, brochure, press release, media briefing, elected official briefing, social media activity, etc.)? pg 13-14

Timetable

Target dates or deadlines for each individual step in process. pg 15

Evaluation (output/outcome)

Measurement is crucial in evaluating success. How will this be measured for success or evaluated to know when more/different is needed? What statistics can show success? i.e., research reports, social media/web site statistics? pg 16

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Before You Begin



Designate a Point of Contact person (POC) and an alternate person and have their full contact information available to all involved. For phone inquiries: “_____ is available to help you or answer questions.”



On all printed documents or digital assets, list POC: Include proper spelling, title, agency, location, and, at the minimum, their e-mail address and phone number.



What is the content clearance process?

Establish a review process to ensure accuracy of shared information and communicate that with stakeholders. Who are the key people that must review and approve materials prior to disseminating?

- Core agency and/or partner(s) project people and/or public affairs with technical and/or program subject matter expertise.

Consider the destination for the materials or news release. i.e., a small local newspaper versus a major media such as a magazine, then ask for review accordingly.



Is there a **budget for communications actions**? Do any partners have funding or in-kind support for carrying out outreach activities?



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Situation Analysis and Background

Telling Your Story

Examining the Current State

How to communicate the importance of this project? What will happen if the issue is not addressed by your project? Describe briefly the current situation and what is prompting action/concern.

Use the background of the project and practices to help craft the story. What have similar projects accomplished? What is the history of the practice?

What are the strengths or positive aspects of the project?

What are some weaknesses? What are some internal points that might serve as a detriment to the communication plan?

What opportunities exist with your project? What are some external factors that will help the project achieve its goals?

Are there any external threats that might prevent the communications goal from being achieved?



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Setting a Communications Goal

Action steps for selected tactic.

This section addresses action steps for defining the Purpose and Goal(s) for selected tactics. What are you seeking to accomplish and why? Are there benefits or features now or forthcoming? Are they measurable?

When I see X at Y, Z, or when A happening, I will know that our communications plan was effective.

Examples:

1) Define your communication goal(s). i.e., "Raise public awareness of _____ in my county by the number of people who respond to a "call to action". Establish an information source for the public to learn about the project, engage the local community to enteract with my project in an on going basis, etc.)

2) Set specific and measurable actions to achieve the goal.

Examples: 100 newsletter subscribers, create a Facebook information sharing group with at least 30 members, receive 5 positive forms of feedback/success stories, hold an event with at least 20 attendees.

3) Communicate the goal with a benefit.

Make your communication goal part of your public statements: "We are trying to raise awareness about this _____ project. Our project will help local producers achieve _____ and provide _____ for the public.

4) Predict possible challenges ahead.

Consider communications actions for your project in its stages: now, when in progress, and at completion. How will your message to the target audiences change?

5) Communicate with all stakeholders when you adjust the message.

Your message will change (at least slightly) over time. Communicate with everyone - your partners, internal and external audiences when they do!

Benefits vs Features: Features are what your project is or does. The benefits are the results. How does your product make someone's life easier, or better, more profitable, or just more interesting?



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Defining Target Audiences

“Who Should Care?”

Audiences - Define as narrowly as possible, including individual internal and external audiences. Take time to understand audiences and their perspectives in order to target them appropriately. What demographics are available?

Start your target audience by examining your current interest group (employees, peers, partners, etc.)

What is their average age, location and knowledge level as related to natural resources management? Stage of life? (new landowners, college students, long-time landowner/operators, etc)

Is any information available about the type of media they consume radio, TV, newspaper, podcasts, etc.? Do they use social media?

Projects of this magnitude can impact an entire community. By communicating, you are essentially telling a story of what you are doing, why you are doing it, who is doing it, and so on. Keep in mind that your target audience may be larger than you think. These projects involve local producers and members of local community, and therefore connections throughout. More connections can only bolster future conservation efforts.



Who specifically are you trying to reach through your project?

Who will be most directly affected by your project?

Who could potentially be interested in your project?

Based on the my knowledge, the current target audiences are:

Potential Target Audiences:

- Professional Peers
- Fellow Employees
- Project Partners
- Farmers and Ranchers
- Beginner Farmers and Ranchers
- Non Operator Land Owners (NOLO)
- Local Communities
- Chambers of Commerce
- Community Service Groups
- Professional Societies, i.e., SRM, SWCS, Engineers, etc.
- Elected Officials
- Government Entities
- Ag Groups
- Environmental Groups
- Consumers
- Media (local, regional, major)
- Ag lenders



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Research Target Audience

What does your target audience already know about your project?

How can you research your target audience?

What are steps you can take to research your audience and how to best reach them?
 Example: Find projects similar to yours and see what they are doing, poll your employees and partners for their perceptions of target audience’s media consumption, google marketing tactics, etc.

What DO you know and DON'T know about that target audience?

(regarding perceptions, attitudes, barriers to participation, etc., that you need to know in order to be successful?)

I DO know: _____

I DON'T know: _____

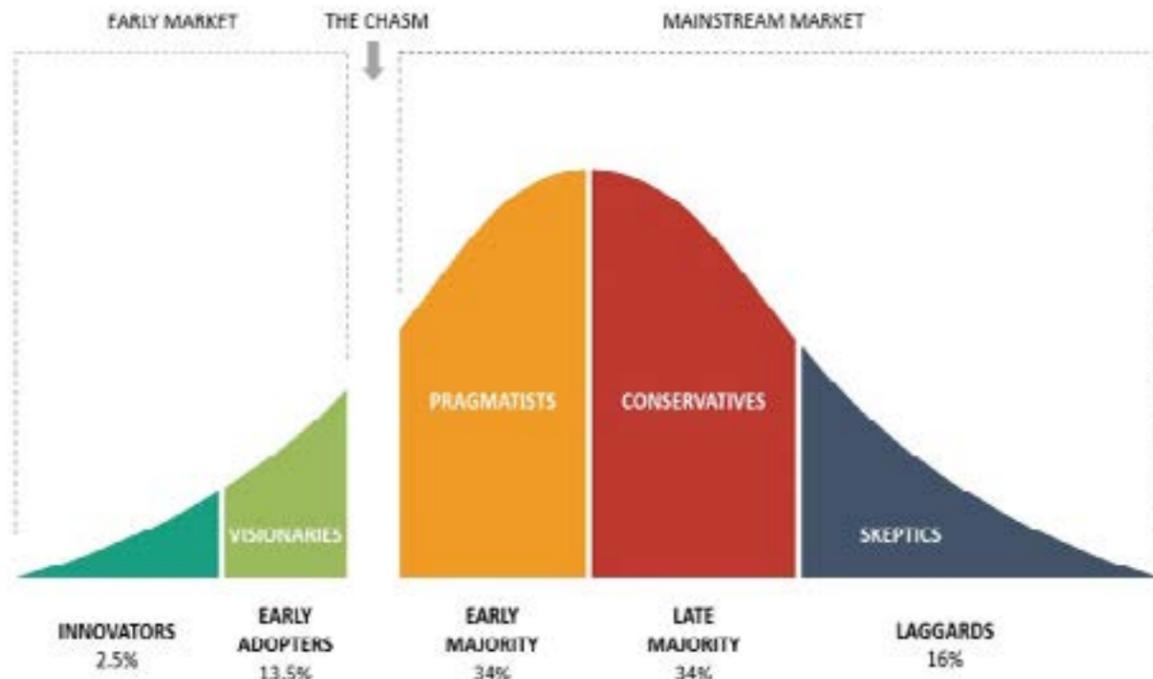
Can you define an audience who might be resistant to your project?



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Growing an Audience

The importance of bridging the gap to Middle Adopters



What is the diffusion curve? Innovative practices diffuse in groups. First, the innovators begin the practice. Then early adopters, known as visionaries take up the mantle and continue to adopt the practice. After that, the mainstream groups take hold. Pragmatists see the value of the practice and begin adopting it. Conservatives who are stauncher in their resistance eventually capitulate and adopt as well, and lastly, the skeptics who question the practice finally adopt it. Eventually, the practice is near universally accepted, so there are few to no new adopters. The difficulty is overcoming the “chasm” or gap between the early adopters and the mainstream.

What is the “chasm?” How does a practice become mainstream? The “chasm” is a gap between the early adopters and the “mainstream”. The challenge is bridging that gap. The gap between the visionaries and the mainstream pragmatists exists largely due to a lack of knowledge. The pragmatists adopt practices because it’s pragmatic to do so,. In regard to conservation practices, bridging this gap involves sharing result of the practice to producers. Once they see the value of it(less erosion, greater yields, etc), the practice enters the mainstream. The key to sharing this is through the lived stories of the innovators and early adopters stepping outside of the current mainstream to forge a new path.



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Planning a Strategy

Short-Term and Long-Term Considerations

What should be communicated NOW?

Example: “While X project has not started, we want to inform the public of exciting changes and opportunities!”

- Sign-up to be a volunteer
- Join our mailing list for updates
- Go to our Facebook group page for more information.

While this project is in progress, what information could be communicated to the public?

Consider periodic soft news or posts such as a photo with caption of a pollinator in a newly reseeded area.

When this project is complete, we should communicate to the public:

Internal Versus External Communications Steps for Success

Internal communications are within your organization and naturally tend to be more controlled. The basic stages to internal communications are:

1. Designate a POC.
2. Brief necessary staff.
3. Update and provide links to necessary materials or information.
4. Prepare key messages and materials.
5. Ask for feedback.

External communications are with the audiences outside the project and require careful planning to ensure that information is properly distributed. The stages are similar, but slightly longer than an internal release:

1. Ensure there is proper authorization for the release externally.
2. Designate a POC.
3. Find a list of all who would be interested and/or need the release.
4. Gather materials and resources that need to be distributed for the release.
5. Determine the methods of distribution.
6. Monitor results or feedback.



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Key Messages

Brainstorming Worksheet

What are your key messages? Key messages make the point of your communication clear and focused. They are the takeaways that you and your target audience should remember if they forget everything else. *Examples: 1. Our project improves wildlife habitat for critical species. 2. Our project helps the local community by adding value to x, y, z that provides better economic stability. 3. Our project makes grazing cattle healthier and more profitable. 4. _____ is an opportunity to receive cost-share for x, y conservation practice that could benefit your operation.*

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

What is the point of your project - your Mission Statement? The mission statement expresses the goal of a project in a clear and succinct way. Mission statements promote public awareness because of their repetition, and help keep the point of the project in mind so it is easy to remember and keep focused. *Example: Bringing clean water to all by stimulating community activity.*

Call to Action: Specifically, what is the first, second, and third steps you're asking the audience to take? *Example: 1. Read our brochure; 2. Attend our meeting; 3. Participate.*

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____



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Venues and Tactics

The following list outlines a variety of venues and tactics to consider for your target audiences. What is the best way to reach your internal and external target audiences? What does your target audience already know about your project? Be creative with ideas that may fit well within your local area but also brainstorm to reach audiences.

Keep in mind Internal vs External information and progress - who needs to know what and when?

Reaching Internal Audiences

- One-on-one contacts
- Phone, e-mail
- NRCS SD eNews
- Presentations at area or state meetings
- Mentor Network

Reaching External Audiences

- Mentor Network
- One-on-one contacts
- Field Day demonstrations
- Tours
- Virtual tours
- Demonstration plots
- Presentations for local organizations, for state conventions
- Information booth at events, i.e., farm shows
- Give-aways or contests
- Billboards
- Presentations at the events of other entities, i.e., association meetings, cafe talks, shop talks

Photography as a Tool

- Consider the purpose of the image
- For documenting success stories
 - Action shots
 - Before, during and after
 - Documenting the completion of a conservation practice as compared to images for telling a story

Working with Traditional Media

Reporters - It's all about relationships

- Know and respect deadlines
- Prepare a Press Kit
- Be prepared for when the media calls: Give them priority and return calls right away. Take good messages with their name, contact information, name of their media outlet, phone number. If possible, ask about the story line, what information are they looking for. Note: privacy information
- Media interviews - impromptu or planned

News or Feature Stories

Types of news - pre-event, post-event, features

- Weekly newspapers
- Daily newspapers
- Tabloids (Tri-State Neighbor, Tri-State Livestock News, Cattle Business Weekly)
- Magazines

There are two methods for working with media to get stories published and each with their own benefits or challenges.

1. Pitch story to media venues for their reporters to develop. Do you have photography available? Will you be able to review before publishing?
2. Develop an article yourself with or without



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photos. When the project develops their own article, they can ensure the accuracy of spelling and other key elements. An alternative is to procure the service of writing, photography, etc. to develop a story with proper review established.

Print Media

- Newspaper ads
- Flyers
- Posters
- U.S. Mail

Broadcast Media

- Radio - news story (pre-recorded, interview with a reporter), guest speaker on radio talk shows, PSAs, Dakota Farm Talk
- TV - news story (pre-recorded or reporter interview), guest speakers on shows, PSAs, paid commercials
- Podcasts
- Activity on Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok? Snapchat?
- Paid ads on broadcast or social media Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok? Snapchat?

Merchandise Outreach

- Stickers, Bumper stickers
- T-shirts/hats/clothing
- Cups/mugs
- Coloring books
- Water Bottles
- Keychains
- Temporary tattoos
- Other

Note: Check with Public Affairs for appropriate use of logos on all items.

Working with Online Venues

Relationships

Build a relationship with established bloggers, influencers, or other entities with a website that lines up with your project.

Social Media Strategies

- Consider a main social media contact/information page
- Coordinate public relation actions and events through social media

Social Media Outreach

Consideration of opportunities with project partners or external partners

E-mail Marketing Campaign and Considerations

- GovDelivery opportunities
- Establishing an e-mailing list
- Content management

Digital marketing

- Google/Bing/Search Engine ads
- Improve Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Webinars/Live online streaming video events

- Participating with other organizations for their events.

Virtual field tour

Example: <https://extension.sdstate.edu/follow-fields-tour>

Partner promotions

Ask partners with larger audiences for ideas for promoting your project and results.

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Communication Timeline

Project Approval, initial plans drawn.

Obtain photos for a feature article

Organize a field tour; Prepare info to Publicize field tour

Report Update for Partners, Stakeholders

	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Project Approval, initial plans drawn.												
Obtain photos for a feature article						X						
Organize a field tour; Prepare info to Publicize field tour							X					
Report Update for Partners, Stakeholders	X			X			X			X		

Project Year One:

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

Project Year Two:

4) _____

	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
1) _____												
2) _____												
3) _____												
4) _____												



Evaluating Communication Efforts

Action Steps for Measuring Communication Goal Results

What are the practical steps needed to measure your communication success?

Who is responsible for each step?

Example 1)

Paul will write an article, Maria will send it out, Maria will communicate findings to project sponsors on January 1. James will decide if communication goal was achieved or if further action is needed.

Example 2)

_____ will record how many attended an event.

_____ is responsible for talking to attendees and reporting positive or negative verbal feedback.

_____ is responsible for the comments box and will read through them and report to project manager.

_____ will decide on *X Date* if the Communications Goal was successful, or if further action is needed.

_____ will monitor social media analytics for data and trends.

Other evaluation considerations



Publicity Checklist

Publicizing Conservation Implementation Strategy Projects

By policy, any CIS Project funding announcements must be posted publicly 30 days prior to the batching date. The NRCS SD process is for the CIS Project to develop the news release locally, then, it will be submitted to the state level Programs and Public Affairs staff for approval, then posted on the news tab of the NRCS SD web site. Once posted on the NRCS web site in accordance with our national policy, local contacts and partners should also disseminate according to their contacts, target audiences, and as outlined in their communications plan. Project staff will need to plan ahead to allow sufficient time for the review process to happen in a timely manner (*45 days prior to the batching deadline*).

Whether it is posted online, in social media or submitted to a news paper or magazine, news releases announcing funding, batching dates, or technical assistance, must include some common elements. The key points of a news release cover "The Five W's and H" and answer who, what, when, where, why and how. Existing news releases may be a good reference and they are published on the NRCS South Dakota Web site at [www.sd.nrcs.usda.gov / Newsroom / News Releases](http://www.sd.nrcs.usda.gov/Newsroom/NewsReleases).

The following is a Checklist for key points and clear language. An example is on the next page.

- Where to get information (URL) or who to contact name, phone, and email.
Example: To apply, and for more information on EQIP, contact your local NRCS Field Office found in USDA Service Centers or go to: nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/sd/programs/financial/eqip/. To find the contact information for your local USDA Service Center, go to: <http://farmers.gov/service-center-locator>.
- In the article, full name of USDA NRCS spelled out and other key partners involved. Once used in the article, then, the acronym is acceptable in a news release.
- Deadline information: "The Batching Date Deadline for Applications is <insert date>."
- With their permission, it is acceptable and encouraged to include quotes by NRCS or a partner(s) regarding the funding opportunity, resource concerns, highlights of the project, conservation practices being utilized, or benefits to society, or other details.
- Include specific information for how to connect with the office staff to enroll. *Example*:* "Specialists with the USDA NRCS are working and available by phone or e-mail while taking safety measures in response to COVID-19. To apply, please contact your local NRCS office. Farmers and ranchers can now start making in-person appointments at several USDA Service Centers across the country as part of USDA's phased reopening process. Other USDA Service Centers remain open for business by phone appointment only.
**This statement is subject to change as situations change.*
- As appropriate for events workshops or tours, etc., the following accommodations statement should be included: "Persons needing special accommodations should contact <name> at <phone number and email address> at least one week in advance of the meeting date."



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Example News Release Template

<<Name of Project>>
 <<Name of contact person>>
 <<Their contact info: email.address@xxx.com | (xxx) xxx - xxxx >>
 Conservation Implementation Strategy (CIS) Project
 USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

Huron, S.D., ___, 2021- CIS Project <<Insert name of CIS project here>> will soon be underway in <<Insert geographic area of project here>>, SD, serving the community and improving land quality. This 3-year project is one of __ selected in Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 and federally-funded through the NRCS conservation programs in the 2018 Farm Bill. The purpose of this project is _____ and will be implemented by __ <local partners> __ in collaboration with farmers, ranchers and landowners. Farmers, ranchers, and landowners within the project areas are eligible to apply for financial assistance. The batching date deadline for applications is _____. The NRCS conservation specialists and partners are coordinating these projects throughout the state. Through collectively focusing expertise and resources on the highest priority resource concerns in the highest priority areas, CIS projects can yield the most impressive returns. Collaborative funding and support from other agencies and groups create a coordinated community effort and focus on mutual issues of concern. The <<Insert project name here>> Project partners with _____ and _____ to directly benefit _____ and _____. Project sponsors identified _____ as resource concern(s) and developed this CIS project to address the situation.

" _____ <<Insert quote from CIS project lead, employee, partner, or involved community member here>> _____," says <local person>, <their role in the project> in <their location>.

Example quote: "Improving water quality in Beadle County and involving producers at the local level for conservation supports sustainability success," says Laura Broyles, NRCS Acting State Conservationist in Huron, SD.

To apply to be a part of this project, find and contact your local NRCS Service Center at www.bit.ly/localSDNRCS, or contact <<local contact person + contact info>>. For more information on the CIS in South Dakota, or if you have ideas for a project, visit www.bit.ly/SDNRCS-CIS, or contact Val Dupraz, Acting Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, at valorie.dupraz@usda.gov or (605) 692-2344.

The USDA Service Centers are open for business. Farmers, ranchers, and landowners can call or e-mail to make in-person appointments at USDA Service Centers across the country. Find and contact your local NRCS Service Center at www.bit.ly/localSDNRCS.

All news releases are archived on the South Dakota NRCS website.
South Dakota State Office
200 Fourth Street SW, Room 203, Huron, SD 57350
Phone: (605) 352-1200 | www.sd.nrcs.usda.gov
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STAY CONNECTED

Helping People Help the Land



USDA United States Department of Agriculture
 Natural Resources Conservation Service

HIGH TUNNEL DEMONSTRATION

AND SYSTEM INITIATIVE

DATE

TIME

LOCATION: <<Address, Directions if Field Tour>>

John Doe will give a tour of his operation and will be giving a talk about <<Subject here>>

This project has the potential to:

- Reduce pesticide use
- Improve Soil Quality
- Benefit the environment:
- Improve Crop Health and Vigor

High tunnels have the potential to yield up to 500 lbs produce per week! <<Highlight a benefit to producer>>

This event is FREE and open to the public, but registration is encouraged!

Persons needing special accommodations should contact <name> at <phone number> and email address> at least one week in advance of the meeting date.

FUNDING AVAILABLE Apply Today!

Technical assistance is available from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and funding is available through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for producers and landowners.

To apply, visit www.bit.ly/SDNRCS-CIS Or, find your local NRCS service center: www.bit.ly/localSDNRCS

www.sd.nrcs.usda.gov
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Other Tools

The following materials are available on the USDA NRCS web page for Resource Concerns and Locally Led Communications.

Go to: [www.sd.nrcs.usda.gov /](http://www.sd.nrcs.usda.gov/)

-> [Technical Resources](#)

-> [NRCS SD Resource Concerns Tools for Locally Led Communications](#)

- [How to Use Traditional and Social Media for Educating Others about Resource Concerns at Locally Led meetings \(PowerPoint\)](#)
- [Social Media Quick Tips for Communicating Resource Concerns with the Locally Led Planning Effort \(PDF\)](#)
- [Strategic Communications Planning Guide \(PDF\)](#)
- [NRCS SD Event Planning Guide \(.docx\)](#)
- [Sample Meeting Notice \(.docx\)](#)
- [Sample Meeting Print News Release \(.docx\)](#)
- [Sample Meeting Radio Story Announcement \(.docx\)](#)
- [When the Media Calls Help Sheet \(PDF\)](#)
- [Resource Concerns Definitions and Clarifications - A Visual Reference for SD's Locally Led Efforts" Presentation \(PowerPoint\)](#)
- ["Resource Concerns" the Handout that supports the presentation \(PDF\)](#)
- [Resource Concerns Simple List for Prioritizing Concerns \(.docx\)](#)

