



United States Department of Agriculture

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS)

# DELAWARE FY 2015 Accomplishments Report



Helping People Help the Land

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# State Conservationist's Message



Fellow Conservationists and Friends,

I am pleased to present the 2015 Accomplishments Report for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Delaware. When reflecting back on this year, I would say it was a banner year for conservation. Let's look at conservation planning for instance. Conservation planning has always been an integrated part of our assistance package and we honed in on the comprehensive steps to complete the planning process this year. We also engaged our key conservation partners to utilize our nine steps of planning.

We continued our emphasis on soil health in partnership with our conservation districts through workshops, panel discussions with soil health experts, field days and more. Soil health continues to remain a focal point as soils are the foundation for our sustainable agricultural lands.

The technical leadership of our employees and conservation partners continues to be solid as we address the complex resource concerns of our diverse operations through proven conservation measures. As we move into 2016, I want to expand upon the conservation efforts that we have already identified as a priority in the state as well as looking at challenges that could touch Delaware in the future. This is why my priorities for the upcoming year are the following:

**Soil Health** management is a key to the long-term production and sustainability of our farmers' working lands. Without the proper care of soil, farmers would not be able to efficiently produce the crops that provide food and nutrients to all.

**Conservation Delivery** looks at the implementation side of conservation planning and ensures that our landowners understand this comprehensive approach to conservation land application. In conservation planning, our technical experts work with landowners to identify problems and opportunities, determine objectives, analyze resource data, and then formulate and evaluate alternatives to achieve their desired goals.

Under **Strategic/Innovative Capabilities**, we look at enhancing our technical assistance for climatic needs and identification of best management practices to ensure stabilization and sustainability has been addressed. Our call to action has been heard for water management, energy needs (audits) and soil health. We will look at next steps for this critical need.

**Long-Term Planning** ensures that we are effectively helping farmers address their conservation goals not only today and in the near future, but over the long-haul. I want to ensure that we stay connected to farming changes into the future.

**Employee Development** is needed to meet the complexities that arise with technology advancements to keep our technical leadership strong. This ensures we continue being a subject-matter expert for our customers in technical assistance and resource planning.

I encourage you to review this report to gain a better insight of the delivery of technical and financial assistance of our programs and services and its beneficial gain to all Delawareans.

Yours in conservation,

Kasey Taylor, Delaware State Conservationist

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# Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands and wetlands and their related benefits.

Under the **Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP - ALE)** component, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) helps state and local governments and non-governmental organizations protect working agricultural lands and limit non-agricultural uses of the land.

The program was established by the Agricultural Act of 2014, commonly known as the 2014 Farm Bill. NRCS partners with approved state or local units of government, and certain nongovernmental organizations who arrange for the purchase of development rights through conservation easements on private lands. The entity holds and manages these conservation easements in perpetuity.

NRCS may contribute up to 50 percent of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement on approved parcels. All parcels are ranked individually on their own merit. Funds will be awarded to the highest ranked eligible parcels through a statewide competitive process. Entities must bear the cost of appraisals, surveys when needed, title search, legal and closing costs, and monitoring and enforcement of the easement.

## **2015 Accomplishments \*\***

In Fiscal Year 2015, ACEP-ALE funds totaling \$2.2 million were awarded to New Castle County, Delaware to assist in purchasing conservation easements on two farms.

Under the **Wetlands Reserve Easements (ACEP - WRE)** component, NRCS helps to restore, protect and enhance enrolled wetlands. Through the wetlands reserve enrollment options, NRCS may enroll eligible land through:

**Permanent Easements** – Permanent easements are conservation easements in perpetuity. NRCS pays 100 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the easement. Additionally, NRCS pays between 75 to 100 percent of the restoration costs.

**30-year Easements** – 30-year easements expire after 30 years. Under 30-year easements, NRCS pays 50 to 75 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the easement. Additionally, NRCS pays between 50 to 75 percent of the restoration costs.

**Term Easements** - Term easements are easements that are for the maximum duration allowed under applicable State laws. NRCS pays 50 to 75 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the term easement. Additionally, NRCS pays between 50 to 75 percent of the restoration costs.

## **2015 Accomplishments \*\***

In Fiscal Year 2015, NRCS funded two ACEP-WRE applications totaling \$1.54 million on 446 acres. One for a permanent easement on 400 acres; the other for a 30-year easement on 46 acres.

(\*\* See page 10)



## Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA)

Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) provides financial and technical assistance to farmers to voluntarily address issues such as water management, water quality and erosion control by incorporating conservation into their farming operations.

Farmers may construct or improve water management structures or irrigation structures; plant trees for windbreaks or to improve water quality; and mitigate risk through production diversification or resource conservation practices (including soil erosion control, integrated pest management or transition to organic farming).

Historically underserved producers (limited resource farmers, beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged producers,

and Veterans who are beginning farmers) may be eligible for a higher practice payment rate for the implementation of conservation practices and conservation plans.

AMA is available in 16 states where participation in the Federal Crop Insurance Program is historically low: Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia and Wyoming.

### 2015 Accomplishments \*

Delaware received five AMA applications in 2015. Delaware approved three contracts covering 3.4 acres for a financial assistance total of \$10,743.

(\*See page 10)

## Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

The Conservation Stewardship Program is a voluntary program that encourages agricultural and forestry producers to address resource concerns by undertaking additional conservation activities, and improving and maintaining existing conservation systems. CSP participants are maintaining and enhancing the treatment of soil quality, soil erosion, water quality, water quantity, air quality, plants, animals and energy. Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, improved pasture land and nonindustrial private forestland.

CSP is available to all producers nationwide, regardless of operation size or crops produced. Applications are accepted on a continuous basis with announced ranking cut-off dates when the ranking and funding of applications on file will occur. Applications need to include the applicant's entire operation and are evaluated and ranked relative to other applications that address similar resource concerns in Delaware. In the ranking process, applicants receive credit for both--conservation measures they have already implemented and for new measures they

agree to add. The applications addressing the most resource concerns to the highest degree will receive the highest rankings.

### 2015 Accomplishments \*

In FY 2015, Delaware NRCS provided \$401,111 in financial assistance through nine new contracts and 14 renewals during the 2015 sign-up period. Renewals were offered to CSP program participants who signed up in 2010 and whose contracts were up for expiration. Two of the new contracts for 2015 CSP contracts were for beginning farmers.

All CSP contracts are for a term of five years. Overall, DE NRCS currently is providing technical and financial assistance to 72 active CSP contracts on 62,399 acres totaling \$1.1 million annually.

(Note: CSP payments are administered on an annual basis.)

(\* See page 10)



## Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA)

The Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) Program provides technical assistance supported by science-based technology and tools to help people conserve, maintain, and improve their natural resources. The CTA program provides the technical capability, including **conservation planning**, design and implementation assistance, that helps people plan and apply conservation on the land. This assistance is provided to individuals, groups and communities who make natural resource management decisions on private, tribal and other non-federal lands.

NRCS, through the CTA Program, provides conservation technical assistance that addresses natural resource conservation issues at the local level that are of state and national concern.

The CTA Program provides the local delivery system and the foundational technical expertise for other NRCS programs. The CTA Program is unique because it provides a substantive level of technical expertise, background and support for Federal, State and local conservation programs. The working relationships that landowners and communities have with their local NRCS staff are unique. One-on-one help through flexible, voluntary programs occurs every day in local NRCS offices. It is the way that NRCS does business and it works.

### Conservation Planning in Delaware

Conservation planning is a process from which conservation plans are developed by first understanding the resource needs and the landowner's desired land use goals. Based on sound scientific practices, NRCS provides hands-on assistance to help the landowner develop a conservation plan.

The benefits for the producer to develop a conservation plan are many. Conservation plans provide a strategic guide for reaching land-use and natural resource goals and provide a complete assessment/inventory of a landowner's resources. Implemented conservation plans can have a positive impact on the bottom line and improve the condition of their natural resources.

Delaware NRCS held a meeting with partners early on in fiscal year 2015 to shape consistent conservation planning and delivery for all land users. Currently USDA NRCS has a nine-step planning process that has been adopted and moved forward by conservation and agricultural partners. These include the three Delaware Conservation Districts, Delaware Department of Agriculture, the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, the Delaware Conservation District Employees Association and the First State Resource Conservation and Development Council.

Next steps include a certification course that would allow any conservation plans developed by partner employees to be incorporated seamlessly and used in local, state and federal programs.

*The technically sound experts of NRCS bring their expertise to the table to help farmers reach their operational and environmental goals.*



## Engineering

The Delaware NRCS Engineering Staff provides sound technical leadership and principles to producers and customers to implement conservation systems and practices on the land. Assistance is provided through evaluation, survey, design, and construction layout and supervision of practices implemented to address natural resource concerns.

Quality assurance is an important role of the Delaware Engineering team. Engineering oversight of projects implemented through public funding assures they meet NRCS Standards and Specifications and function properly to solve the resource concern as intended.

The engineering team is also responsible for training field staff as new technology emerges, new conservation practices are introduced, or as new employees are hired. Advances in survey equipment, computer-aided design and drafting, and engineering software require that the staff master this technology and be able to train field personnel so they can most efficiently implement conservation programs.

All of the implementation accomplishments included in this report have, in some way, been assisted by the Delaware NRCS Engineering Team. In 2015, a growing number of producers identified a need for energy-saving practices. The Delaware Engineering Team developed design templates and specifications to allow planners to more efficiently assist producers reduce their energy consumption.

The engineering staff helps get the conservation on the ground.



*Energy efficient practices such as these LED lights, radiant heaters and attic insulation in poultry houses help to save on electricity costs and have a longer rated life, among other benefits. Delaware engineers provide the designs for these beneficial energy-saving practices.*



# Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers through contracts up to a maximum term of ten years in length. These contracts provide financial assistance to help plan and implement conservation practices that address natural resource concerns and for opportunities to improve soil, water, plant, animal, air and related resources on agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland. In addition, a purpose of EQIP is to help producers meet Federal, State, Tribal and local environmental regulations.

EQIP provides financial assistance payments to eligible producers based on a portion of the average cost associated with practice implementation. Additional payments may be available to help producers develop conservation plans which are required to obtain financial assistance.

Historically underserved (HU) producers (limited resource farmers, beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged producers, and Veterans who are beginning farmers) may be eligible for a higher practice payment rate for the implementation of conservation practices and conservation plans. HU producers may also be eligible for advance payments up to 50 percent of the cost needed to purchase materials or contracting services to begin installation of approved conservation practices.

Producers may use a certified Technical Service Provider (TSP) for technical assistance needed for certain eligible activities, services and the development of conservation plans.

Delaware's EQIP incorporates environmental priorities as identified at the state level (State Technical

Committee) and local levels (Local Work Groups) into the selection of what specific program options will be offered, and what factors, questions and screening tools will be used in the application ranking process. Ranking worksheets for each program option include evaluation questions that reflect national, state and local priorities.

## **2015 Accomplishments \***

Delaware received 440 EQIP applications for fiscal year 2015.

Delaware approved 174 contracts covering 28,222 acres for a total financial assistance of \$6,103,874. Included in these numbers are 21 approved contracts covering 4,398 acres assisting beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged and limited resource producers with financial assistance totaling \$2,576,427.

## **EQIP funding options:**

- Beginning Farmers
- Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI)
- Energy Initiative
- Limited Resource Farmers
- National Water Quality Initiative
- Organic Initiative
- Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative
- Socially Disadvantaged Producers
- Veterans

## **Top Practices:**

- Heavy Use Area Pads
- Waste Storage Structures
- Energy
- Irrigation (Water Management)
- Cover Crops
- Nutrient management
- Composters

(\*See page 10)



# Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is the newest conservation tool of USDA NRCS created in the 2014 Farm Bill.

RCPP encourages multiple partners—such as private companies, local and tribal governments, universities, non-profit groups and other non-government partners—along with farmers, and forest landowners to design conservation-based solutions that work best for their region. Local partners and the federal government both invest funding and manpower to projects to maximize their impact.

RCPP allows local partners the opportunity to design and invest in conservation projects that are specifically tailored to make an impact well beyond what the Federal government could accomplish on its own.

**RCPP Funding** - Funding for RCPP is allocated to projects in three different categories:

**Critical Conservation Areas** - Each CCA has an overarching goal that includes addressing priority resource concerns that are common throughout the area.

For projects in eight geographic areas chosen by the Secretary of Agriculture. These receive 35 percent of funding. The Chesapeake Bay Watershed CCA encompasses Delaware.

**National** -For nationwide and multistate projects that further the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of natural resources. These receive 40 percent of funding.

**State** - For projects in a single state that address state-specific or national priorities. These receive 25 percent of funding.

## 2015 Accomplishments \*

Delaware funded one proposal out of its state funding pool. The proposal was submitted by Sussex Conservation District and aims to improve water quality through watershed channel restoration projects that stabilize tax ditch banks in Sussex County, Delaware. The project will reduce the amount of sediment and nutrients entering streams and rivers by installing a variety of conservation practices including shoreline protection and water control structures.

(\*See page 10)



## Soil Sciences and GIS

The main goal of the soils staff in Delaware is to provide scientifically defensible and timely delivery of technical soils information to internal and external partners to meet their ever changing resource challenges. Accurate soils information is the foundation on which NRCS and many partners base their resource initiatives on.

Over the last year the soils staff in Delaware in cooperation with the soil survey division updated 114,348 acres of soil information to more accurately reflect our understanding of these soils. Included in this update was the amendment of the yields table to better replicate typical yields recorded by farmers through improvements in seed varieties, better nutrient management and increased use of irrigation. These types of edits will occur yearly as the soils data is updated in real time. Accurate soils information is currently available online for the whole state through Web Soil Survey, Soil Web

app, Geo-Spatial Data Gateway and the electronic Field Office Technical Guide eFOTG.

Moreover, Technical Soil Services (TSS) remain the largest work load for the staff in Delaware. Requests range from onsite geo-technical investigations for agricultural structures and best management practices to environmental compliance requirements associated with Farm Bill Programs.

Furthermore, the GIS staff is actively creating, managing and disseminating digital resource spatial data to all partners and external clients to facilitate proper land use planning decisions throughout Delaware and the Mid-Atlantic region. In addition, the TSS team provides a variety of soils information for urban land use requests.



**The Natural Resources Conservation Service is an agency of  
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**Note:**

\* All data marked with this symbol has been pulled by NRCS' program specialists through the Program Contracts System, known as ProTracts. This web-based system is used to manage program data for AMA, CSP and EQIP.

\*\* All data marked with this symbol has been pulled by NRCS' program specialists through the National Easement Staging Tool (NEST). This web-based system is used to manage program data for NRCS' easement programs including ACEP-ALE and ACEP-WRE.