

Overview

Resource Stewardship Evaluation is a new tool in conservation planning that assists producers in achieving a stewardship level of conservation, recognizes the stewardship benefits achieved by farmers, ranchers and forestland owners and better communicates the alternatives offered through conservation planning and science-based conservation practice implementation.

A farmer's or rancher's voluntary stewardship is evaluated across an array of natural resource concerns related to soil management, water quality and quantity, plant health, wildlife habitat and air quality.



How does a Resource Stewardship Evaluation work?

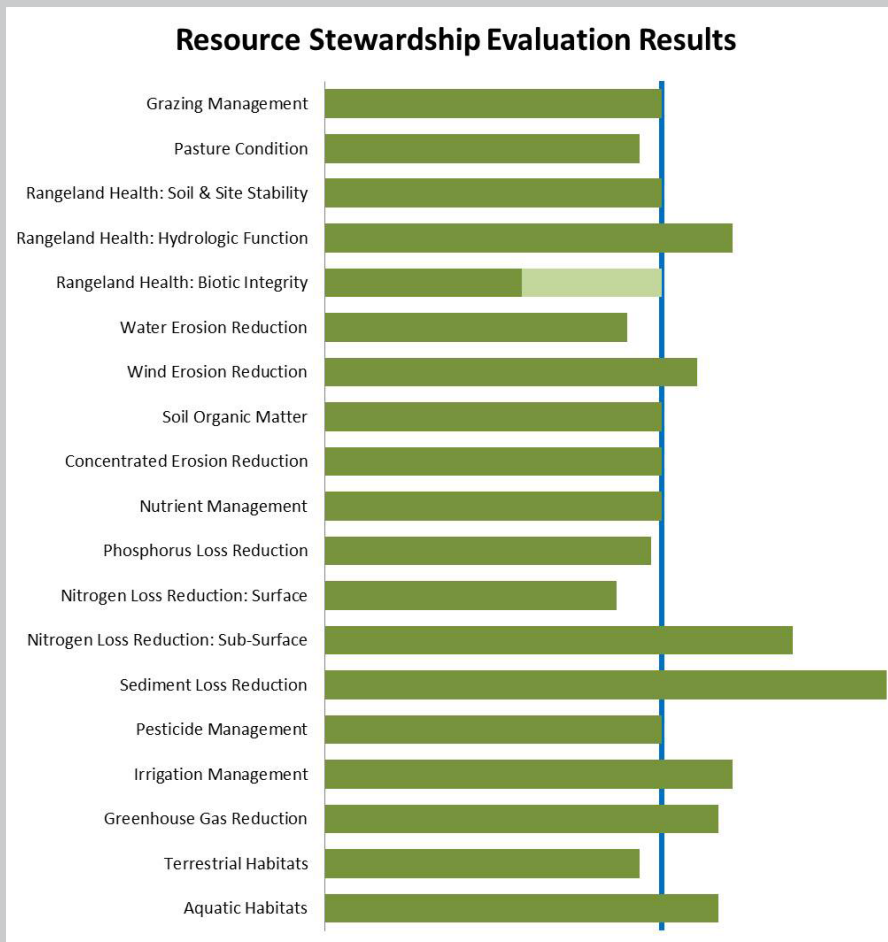
A Resource Stewardship Evaluation is a new tool and service that strengthens and modernizes conservation planning and helps farmers, ranchers and forest landowners better identify their conservation goals and improve their outcomes. It evaluates an operation's current management and conservation activities by comparing stewardship thresholds for five overarching natural resource concerns: soil management, water quality, water quantity, air quality and wildlife habitat.

- **Soil Management** looks at the health of cropland soil and grazing land resources, which includes reducing erosion, increasing soil organic matter, and improving plant health.
- **Water Quality and Quantity** focuses on decreasing nutrient and sediment run-off, reducing pesticide migration and improving water management.
- **Air Quality** emphasizes reducing on-farm greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Habitat Health** focuses on improving both land and aquatic habitats for wildlife.

These thresholds are science-based and set by NRCS at levels that maintain the right balance between productive agriculture and healthy natural resources. Resource stewardship includes meeting these thresholds for multiple resource concerns, as illustrated by the blue stewardship threshold line in Figure 1 on the next page.

After NRCS uses RSE to evaluate the current conservation and management system against these thresholds, land managers can better understand how their farm is operating as a whole, see the value of current conservation efforts and determine their areas for improvements. The results of the evaluation can guide the development of a conservation plan that improves performance toward the resource stewardship thresholds.

Figure 1.



How does Resource Stewardship affect the conservation planning process?

This new evaluation tool is based on a planning framework that integrates many of NRCS' planning tools into one package, and looks more holistically at an agricultural operation's current management and conservation activities. The evaluation then compares those results to NRCS's stewardship benchmarks for five natural resource concerns.

By using this tool, NRCS can help answer field-specific questions for a producer, such as:

- How is the operation faring in terms of reducing erosion and increasing soil organic matter?
- How is the operation doing with water management and preventing nutrient run-off?
- What about curbing net greenhouse gas emissions and opportunities for improving habitat for wildlife?

NRCS evaluates the operation for each area and provides the results in an easy-to-read graph showing how producers' decisions affect the well being of the natural resources under their care.

The producer can then see where their operation lies on the spectrum with regard to those specific concerns—whether that's meeting the threshold, exceeding it or identifying opportunities for improvements.

As more countries and corporations require greater use of sustainability metrics from their suppliers, resource stewardship represents an opportunity for landowners to quantify and verify their conservation achievements and communicate those achievements to business partners, government agencies, organizations and/or the public. As part of the conservation planning process, this information is protected information and can only be shared at the producer's request.

What are the benefits?

For NRCS cooperators, customers and partners, the RSE provides an easy-to-read graph of how management decisions affect the well being of the natural resources under their care.

The evaluation is a transparent and verifiable way to show the benefits of existing and planned conservation activities.

As such, it is an important decision support tool that makes the RMS conservation planning process easier for conservation planners and landowners. It also helps conservation planners prioritize their work, since running the tool for a new customer could quickly reveal which areas need special attention.

Who can get an evaluation?

In 2016, Resource Stewardship Evaluations will be available in selected watersheds as part of the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI). The Resource Stewardship Evaluation can be performed on crop, range and pasture lands.

Eligible applicants for NWQI funding include individuals, legal entities, Indian Tribes or joint operations engaged in agricultural production in certain NWQI watersheds.

How to apply

Visit your local USDA Service Center to apply or visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/getstarted.



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