



### Message from Chief Lancaster

**T**he Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is renowned for its technical expertise and the strong relationship it has with farmers, ranchers, and other stewards of the land. Yet, as with any organization, it is only as good as its employees. Fortunately, NRCS is composed of a highly skilled and dedicated workforce. People make this agency; and as a result, we are an employer of choice, we are preeminent in our field, and our efforts result in a real, positive difference for our environment and our customers.

In 2005, NRCS unveiled the *NRCS Strategic Plan 2005-2010*. The *Strategic Plan* sets the direction for NRCS and describes our long-term goals and strategies. That plan is now complemented by this comprehensive Human Capital Strategic Plan, which will provide direction for the management of our workforce and help us meet the goals outlined in the *Strategic Plan*. Over the next five years, more than 50 percent of federal employees will be eligible to retire. As an agency, we must meet the challenges associated with the potential loss of our most experienced employees and position ourselves to maintain our knowledge base and compete for talented newcomers.

This comprehensive human capital plan will guide us as we seek to attract new employees, retain experienced employees, and keep NRCS's already high standing as an employer of choice. We have a culture of success and we want to continue to build on that environment. Of course, it assures that NRCS will continue to embrace diversity and offer new opportunities for our employees to excel in their professions—all with the goals of better serving the public, building partnerships, and providing all Americans the benefits of healthy and productive natural resources.

Implementation of the Human Capital Strategic Plan will be key in building and maintaining an outstanding and diverse agency, one that recruits, acquires, motivates and rewards a high-performing, quality workforce. It is my expectation that the Human Capital Strategic Plan will be a helpful tool for all of us in fulfilling NRCS's mission of "Helping People Help the Land."

Arlen L. Lancaster  
Chief



## About This Effort and Document

In December 2005, a diverse leadership team or “Core Team” was appointed to begin development of the Human Capital Strategic Plan (HCSP). The Core Team, comprised of managers and leaders from around the country, came together for strategic planning sessions over a four-month period. During these sessions, the Team identified key human capital drivers and areas of focus which resulted in the development of the HCSP.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) accomplishes its mission of “Helping People Help the Land” through the collaborative efforts of leaders, employees, conservation partners, volunteers, retirees, and private technical service providers. The Agency’s success in achieving its vision of “Productive Lands-Healthy Environment” depends upon our workforce having the technical expertise, dedication, and ability to work collaboratively with a diverse customer base.

The Core Team focused on the Agency’s mission, factoring in the human aspect of the mission to ensure that we have the right people in place to get the job done. This team built on the work of the team that developed the Workforce Planning

Strategy 2004-2008, captured lessons learned from that initiative, designed an integrated process, and engaged leaders and staff from across the Agency to develop a comprehensive plan.

Throughout this plan, NRCS has laid out key human capital strategic goals, objectives, and outcomes that the Agency will commit to and execute over the next five fiscal years. These will ensure the Agency is positioned and equipped to meet current and future workforce challenges and needs.

Developed with input and advice from Agency leaders, each of the five Human Capital goals includes objectives for accomplishment and the outcomes that the Agency expects to achieve. The goals are aligned with the Agency’s strategic plan and build upon the Agency’s guiding principles of service, partnership and technical excellence.

### The Five Strategic Goals are:

- **Leadership** – Develop leaders to ensure NRCS achieves conservation success through cooperative and innovative approaches for its investment in and delivery of products, technology, and services.

- **Recruitment & Retention** – Develop effective strategies to recruit and retain a highly skilled and diverse workforce to meet customer needs and to transform the Agency into the Employer of Choice.
- **Performance Culture** – Advance to a results-oriented culture that fosters innovation, motivates staff, and sustains a high performing, diverse workforce.
- **Talent Development/Knowledge Management** – Develop, promote, and retain a culture of continuous learning to ensure that the workforce has the knowledge, skills, and abilities to achieve the Agency’s strategic goals.
- **Human Capital Effectiveness** – Ensure that human capital management is recognized as a critical component of the Agency’s mission and that human capital strategies, programs, and systems are aligned and measured to effectively achieve Agency goals.



The HCSP further defines each goal through outcome statements and objectives. The Plan is a multi-year road map, providing a mechanism to track progress and to make adjustments as needed. Through these strategic goals and initiatives, NRCS employees can see the direct link between the Agency's overall mission and its strategic management of human capital.

The Human Capital Strategic Plan complies with and supports the President's Management

Agenda (PMA) and the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Human Capital Assessment and Accountability Framework (HCAAF). The latter establishes "Standards for Success" for human capital management.

This plan is a companion to the Agency's strategic plan and helps guide the activities needed to ensure our workforce has the skills and operates within organizational structures necessary to achieve our goals. The human capital goals outlined in

this plan, along with effective implementation and measurement of these goals, will better enable the Agency to help the American public be good stewards of the land. Intricately linked, each strategy is a catalyst to the other, allowing NRCS to explore new and creative ways to achieve Agency goals through the strategic management of its workforce.





# Introduction

**F**rom a beginning based on the dream of Hugh Hammond Bennett, a career soil scientist at the USDA in the late 1920s and early 1930s, principles have guided the Agency's work.

Throughout the evolution from the Soil Erosion Service to the Soil Conservation Service, and ultimately to the present day Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Agency has embraced the complexity of our charter and the far reaching effects of our mission.



*Coon Creek Watershed*

## Guiding Principles – Then and Now Service - Partnership - Technical Excellence

- Working with private land owners to meet their voluntary conservation objectives is as viable today as it was in 1935.
- Providing resource assessments and identifying opportunities and solutions to address conservation problems is a key component of helping people help the land.
- Through science, diverse disciplines, and technology, NRCS supports a holistic approach to healthy watersheds and individual properties and the development of plans to manage and improve the natural resources.
- Implementing conservation one property at a time contributes to and elevates the quality of life for both a region and a watershed.

It's about conservation on the land. NRCS was the first to collaborate with the farmers of southwestern Wisconsin. They transformed the Coon Creek watershed into a showplace that benefited the soil, air, water, as well as the plant, animal, and human life of the whole watershed.



*First Conservation District*

It's about service to our customers, providing the foundation for collaboration, innovation, and positive change.

It's about passion, dedication, and a willingness to take on and meet the ever-growing challenges.

It's about knowing that even with technology, programs, policies, and initiatives, people make the difference.



*Hugh Hammond Bennett*

Hugh Bennett knew that our workforce would need to be as diverse as the complexity of the conservation problems facing the Nation.

Agronomy, forestry, soil science, biology, engineering, and social sciences were only a starting point for the key discipline areas needed to provide conservation assistance.

Similarly, we know today that new disciplines and strategies will be needed for NRCS to seize a leadership role in market-based approaches to conservation and to capitalize on the benefits that increased funding sources bring to the Nation's conservation needs.

NRCS makes a difference by  
Helping People Help the Land!



# NRCS Organization

## *Helping People Help the Land*

**N**RCS provides technical and financial assistance to help agricultural producers and others care for the land. The assistance we provide is based on an understanding that the land - the landscape as a whole - must be the focus of conservation. Using this comprehensive approach, the people we help are able to help the land function as a sustainable system that provides a high standard of living and a quality of life for today and for future generations.

## **A Partnership Approach**

Since the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, NRCS has worked with conservation districts and others throughout the U.S. to help landowners, as well as federal, state, tribal, and local governments and community groups conserve natural resources on private lands.

NRCS has six mission goals that include high quality productive soils; clean and abundant water; healthy plant and animal communities; clean air; an adequate energy supply; and working farms and ranchlands. To achieve these goals, the Agency implements three strategies:

- **Cooperative conservation**- seeking and promoting cooperative efforts to achieve conservation goals.
- **Watershed approach**- providing information and assistance to encourage and enable locally-led, watershed-scale conservation.
- **Market-based approach**- facilitating the growth of market-based opportunities that encourage the private sector to invest in conservation on private lands.



**Conservation Assistance**

NRCS provides conservation assistance through a nationwide network of local offices in partnership with soil and water conservation districts. Our locally-based NRCS staff works directly with farmers and ranchers to provide technical and financial conservation assistance.

NRCS helps landowners develop conservation plans and provides advice on the design, layout, construction, management, operation, maintenance, and evaluation of the recommended voluntary conservation practices. Technical and financial assistance is delivered through five business lines described in the NRCS Strategic Plan. The Agency's programs and other federal, state, or local cost-share programs may be available

to help producers implement conservation practices, as well as provide incentives to qualified landowners to protect their natural resources.

NRCS works on a variety of activities that include farmland protection, upstream flood prevention, emergency watershed protection, urban conservation, and local community projects designed to improve social, economic, and environmental conditions.

NRCS conducts soil surveys, conservation needs assessments, and the National Resources Inventory to provide a basis for resource conservation planning activities and to provide an accurate natural resource assessment of the condition of the Nation's private lands.

As the leading source of technology for natural resources conservation, NRCS develops technical guides and other Web-based tools for use by landowners, NRCS staff, private consultants, conservation districts and other federal, state, and local conservation agencies to help enhance their natural resource conservation efforts.







## Reorganization

The Natural Resources Conservation Service reorganized its activities above the State Office level in 2004. The purpose of the reorganization was to strengthen the multi-disciplinary technology support to States; consolidate similar functions to enhance communication and coordination; align human capital resources with mission, goals, and organizational objectives; provide an improved career ladder for technical personnel; and balance Deputy Areas and workload at the national level. The reorganization did not directly affect state, area, or field office personnel.

Farm policies enacted by Congress beginning in 1985 and then in 1990, 1996, and 2002, have greatly expanded the Agency's technical assistance role on the Nation's private land. NRCS has strived to respond to emerging issues in such a way that the public's investment in conservation technologies yield recommendations based on best science. Since the 1985 Farm Bill, NRCS has been challenged to make investments in and deliver its technology and other services as programmatic responsibilities have increased. The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 authorized USDA to use Technical Service Providers to perform conservation work. In response to this and other provisions of the Act, NRCS realigned functions to address changing demands and better meet our customers' needs.

As NRCS moves to continue to serve as a catalyst of conservation, emphasis is placed on conservation planning and the supporting technology. Specific changes have included realigning the six Regional Offices into three Regional Assistant Chief Offices to streamline delivery and reduce the number of layers and offices in the Agency; combining the Resource Inventory and Assessment Divisions to streamline and improve integration of inventory and assessment functions; realigning the International Programs Division from Programs to Soil Survey and Resource Assessment; realigning the Operations Management & Oversight staff from seven offices into two offices located at National Headquarters (NHQ) and Fort Worth, Texas; adding the responsibility for policies and procedures for Technical Service Providers; and realigning the Animal Husbandry and Clean Water Programs Division from Programs to Science and Technology. The Programs Area was restructured to better plan and direct new program activities and funding levels of the 2002 Farm Bill. New divisions were established (Easement Programs, Financial Assistance

Programs, Conservation Planning and Technical Assistance, and the Resource Conservation & Development and Rural Lands). The Watersheds and Wetlands Division was abolished and the functions realigned to other divisions within Programs to streamline activities and enhance communications.

As part of the reorganization, NRCS abolished the institutes and the cooperating scientists positions, and established three National Technology Support Centers. These Centers provide direct technical assistance to the states; leadership in technology development, acquisition, and transfer; training; and the development and maintenance of national technical standards, references and related materials. Establishing these technology centers centralized functions, increased the efficiency and precision of our technological operations, and allowed us to meet the challenges of today's constantly changing technology developments.







## NRCS Challenges & Culture

Evaluating and addressing the Agency's human capital strategies comes at an opportune time. The President's Management Agenda, the NRCS Strategic Plan, and the Agency's review of the National Employee Development Center all address management initiatives on human capital and employee development needs.

Implementing strategies developed from these will position NRCS to be the "employer of choice" – attracting and retaining talented people. Employees who are recruited, coached, mentored, and trained are better able to meet the Agency's strategic goals and customers' needs.

The President's Management Agenda (PMA) identifies the strategic management of human capital as a key issue. The PMA states "agencies will determine their 'core competencies' and decide whether to build internal capacity, or contract for services from the private sector." As a result, citizens will recognize improved service; agencies will build, sustain, and effectively deploy a skilled, knowledgeable, and diverse workforce to meet current and emerging needs; and high performance will define federal service.



The USDA Human Capital Plan identifies leadership development, knowledge management, and employee development as critical needs.

The NRCS Strategic Plan (2005) includes management initiatives for improving internal management so that we can "manage our human capital strategically to ensure the right skills in the right locations to deliver high-quality products and services."

Changes and trends that impact human capital include the following:

1. The 2002 Farm Bill created a significantly increased workload for NRCS employees. While there have been some additional employees hired, the Agency has had to absorb the work, increase the use of grants and agreements, broaden its partnerships, and expand its work with Technical Service Providers, volunteers, and Agricultural Conservation Enrollees/Seniors (ACES).
2. A significant number of the workforce is currently eligible to retire or will become so in the next few years.
3. The Agency is addressing new and increasingly complex issues, such as energy and air.
4. Cooperative efforts with and the diversity of customers and partners are expanding.
5. Recent changes in certain programs have shifted additional administrative responsibilities to NRCS.
6. Electronic government and accountability requirements have increased the need for the Agency's services, products, tools, and information to be accessible on the internet.
7. Fluctuations in funding levels require flexibility in meeting workforce needs, including the number, tenure (e.g., temporary) and location of positions.
8. Federal agencies and the private sector are competing for qualified potential employees from a smaller pool of applicants.
9. Greater turnover is occurring as new entrants to the workforce feel less of a long-term commitment to their employers.
10. Newly-hired employees will increasingly come from mid-career changes.
11. Individuals are remaining in the workforce longer due to changes in retirement systems and economic influences.
12. Employees need timely and relevant information and training.
13. Effective leadership development programs are necessary for the future of the Agency.
14. Technical Service Providers and partners require training.