



CONSERVATION PLANNING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Background

USDA is authorized to use a broad range of programs to encourage the voluntary conservation of natural resources on private lands. Through this portfolio of programs, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides information, technical assistance, and financial incentives to individuals, groups, tribes, communities, and units of government. The Conservation Technical Assistance Program is the primary source for providing conservation planning expertise and assistance and forms the basis for the conservation partnerships with State and local governments and conservation districts.

NRCS helps its clients develop conservation plans that are essentially blueprints for addressing natural resource concerns. USDA technical experts help individuals and communities take a comprehensive approach to planning the proper use and protection of natural resources on private and other non-Federal land across the Nation.

Public awareness of resource challenges is increasing. As a result, nontraditional rural and urban customers are increasingly requesting USDA conservation planning and technical assistance. Conservation planning provides a firm foundation to assess resource problems, evaluate treatment alternatives, and match a client's needs to available financial assistance and other voluntary conservation incentives.

The Conservation Technical Assistance Program is a key component in the implementation of USDA's farm bill conservation programs. Also, since enactment of the 2002 farm bill, NRCS has certified and coordinated qualified Technical Service Providers to assist with planning and technical aspects of conservation projects. To date, more than 2,540 Technical Service Providers are certified. Over the past 3 fiscal years, USDA has provided \$125.4 million for Technical Service Providers. In fiscal year 2005, \$52 million was obligated.

General Opinions Expressed

Technical Service Providers (TSP)

- Some commenters called for increased funding for the expanded use of private sector TSPs.
- Some commenters stated that TSPs should be funded through direct grants to State and local agencies and nongovernmental organizations. This partnership would provide better coordination between farm bill programs and State and local programs.

- Funding and programmatic direction are needed for TSPs specific to organic producers.
- Expand use of TSPs in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).
- Several comments advocated creation and funding for Environmental Management Systems, linking public and private organizations to provide technical and educational support to improve producer environmental performance through third-party recommendations and evaluation. Funding would support creation of the network, development of educational programs, and research on program efficacy.

NRCS Technical Assistance

- Many indicated that the Conservation Technical Assistance Program is the model of providing timely education to our farm community and others making land-use decisions, and thus that the farm bill should continue the program.
- Need to maintain the conservation provisions and the technical assistance at the current levels for the 2007 farm bill and increase funding levels of the Conservation Technical Assistance program.
- There is general support for increasing the availability of engineering technical assistance to implement conservation programs, specifically EQIP.
- NRCS staff needs to be back in the field working with individual farmers and ranchers, not working at their office computer.
- Funding should go to locally educating the farmers and farming families, allowing landowners to learn from other landowners.
- Some commenters asked USDA to establish or improve technical assistance programs tailored to subsistence agriculture and organic agriculture.
- Some commenters asked for increased and improved monitoring of technical assistance project impacts on target habitats and species.
- Some commenters requested that USDA provide technical assistance in urban areas for conservation.

Detailed Suggestions Expressed

- TSPs have the ability to add capacity to the services delivered by USDA. Providing the State NRCS and FSA offices with increased TSP funding and raised flexibility in determining how and when to involve the technical assistance of a TSP, as well as allowing for TSP assistance to span all conservation title programs, will dramatically increase USDA's ability to deliver conservation title programs more efficiently.
- Support full funding of conservation programs to take care of the signup backlogs at the Farm Service Agency and NRCS.
- Some commenters wanted more project engineering technical assistance on reservations, and expressed reservations about Technical Service Providers.
- The Navajo Nation wants to be involved with crafting the partnership agreement on enabling Navajo members to have equal access to USDA programs, funds, technical assistance, and education.
- NRCS spends too much time doing compliance and status reviews on conservation programs rather than helping clients. NRCS should focus on getting new conservation projects implemented.

- Provide specific legislative language in the next farm bill to assign Conservation Specialists at the district level to work with individual farmers, providing oversight for county, State, and Federal compliance issues, ongoing maintenance, and outreach.