



TSP Express

A report for Technical Service Providers
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USDA Releases 2006 Maximum Payment Rates For Technical Service Providers



The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) recently released its 2006 "not-to-exceed" payment rates for certified technical service providers.

"Not-to-exceed" payment rates are the maximum NRCS will reimburse farmers and ranchers when they contract with private-sector certified technical service providers.

"Generally the rates have increased," NRCS Chief Bruce Knight said. "USDA program participants can be reimbursed up to these rates when acquiring conservation technical services from the private sector. We feel confident these rates will reflect the cost to the federal government to provide these services." NRCS administers the technical service provider process, in existence since March 2003.

NRCS established these rates for conservation practices implemented in certain categories of technical services for each state. To ensure consistency across state lines, the agency reviewed payment rates between adjacent states where similar resource

conditions and agricultural operations exist. It also considered variables such as differences in state laws, cost of doing business and competition.

NRCS also updated its Technical Assistance Cost of Conservation Practices (TACCP) database, used to develop the payment rates. TACCP reflects the agency's total cost to provide technical assistance to plan, design, install and check out conservation practices. It uses cost information obtained from sub-state areas, which reflect common natural resource, regulatory, geographic, social and economic factors. These factors affect the time needed to plan and implement conservation practices.

These revised payment rates apply to new contracts through January 2007. Existing contracts will continue to use the 2003 and 2004-2005 payment rates as applicable. NRCS state conservationists can adjust "not-to-exceed" payment rates with adequate justification and documentation.

The 2006 "not-to-exceed" payment rates can be found at <http://techreg.sc.egov.usda.gov/NTE/TSPNTE2/index.asp>. Technical service providers and others can access earlier "not-to-exceed" payment rates at the same Web site.

USDA-NRCS Obligates \$51.6 Million for Technical Service Providers in Fiscal Year 2005

USDA-NRCS provided more than \$51.6 million in fiscal year 2005 to support the use of private businesses, non-profit organizations, tribes, universities and public agencies as technical service providers.

Private-sector technical service providers will receive \$32 million, or 62.5 percent of the total funds USDA-NRCS obligated for technical service providers through its various conservation programs. Most of the remaining funds will be distributed to state agencies, soil and water conservation districts, non-government organizations, universities, resource conservation and development

councils and tribes. Funds allocated to a contract or agreement will be paid once the technical services are completed.

To date, USDA-NRCS has more than 2,600 certified technical service providers listed in its national Internet-based registry called TechReg. Farmers, ranchers and other landowners seeking conservation technical assistance use TechReg to locate technical service providers.

NRCS plans to provide about \$40 million for the technical service provider process in fiscal year 2006.

Technical Service Providers Must Renew Certification Agreements

Technical service providers must renew their certification agreements every three years as required by NRCS policy. Agreements began to expire in March 2006. During certification renewals, NRCS staff will review a technical service provider's application, criteria and qualifications as required by the final rule, published in November 2004. The rule also requires state conservationists to approve certification agreements.

Eventually, renewals will impact every technical service provider registered in TechReg. NRCS is alerting technical service providers via e-mail of their expiration date based on their original certification agreement. This advance notice will instruct them how to renew. Technical service providers no longer interested in participating can use the renewal process to opt out.

New certifications will be based on updated technical service categories, which took effect January 2006.

Below are tips to help with the certification renewal process:

- Review the technical service categories closely before you renew your certification.

- Review the entire certification application to ensure the technical service provider categories are accurate.
- Document that you meet the criteria for those categories.
- Review and update Profile Part 1 Sections – A through F and ensure the information in each section is complete and accurate.
- Ensure the information in the sections support the options selected to qualify you for certification in the categories selected in Part 2.
- Select new categories for certification in Profile Part 2.
- Confirm qualifications for each category selected. Ensure the appropriate sections in Profile Part 1 match the criteria selected to qualify you for each category.
- Select counties for servicing area (optional).
- Sign the renewal agreement

The technical service provider's selected categories will be placed in a renewal pending status. NRCS staff will verify the information within 60 days. If a technical service provider selects multiple states for certification, then the resident state coordinator will notify his or her counterparts as appropriate.

As the certifying official, the state conservationist can renew the certification, hold for further review, or reject it. The state conservationist will notify the technical service provider of the final decision by letter.

Technical service providers are encouraged to contact their state coordinators for additional information regarding the renewal process and the status of their applications.

NRCS Revises Certification Categories

Technical service providers interested in helping landowners participating in NRCS programs must review the revised Technical Service Categories and Criteria.

NRCS updated the technical service categories, options and criteria to ensure the national criteria were consistent and accurate.

The agency significantly changed at least 20 of the 42 categories. Key changes include:

- training requirements were made consistent
- options were restructured to allow for group organization certification
- selected categories were broken down into smaller categories, such as forestry and agroforestry.
- names of certain categories were changed. For example, the wildlife and fisheries interdisciplinary category was changed to wildlife interdisciplinary.

The categories will be updated every three years. Additional information about the certification categories can be obtained at <http://techreg.usda.gov>.

USDA Signs Agreement with Certified Professional in Erosion and Sediment Control, Inc.



USDA has signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Certified Professional in Erosion and Sediment Control, Inc. (CPESC). NRCS Chief Bruce Knight and CPESC Executive Director

David Ward signed the three-year agreement, which recognizes certifications in soil erosion and sediment control as well as storm water quality.

The MOU allows CPESC to recommend its members to NRCS for certification in soil erosion and sediment control and storm water quality. They must complete CPESC's certified programs in these two areas to meet USDA's performance criteria for providing conservation assistance in soil erosion and sediment control and storm water quality.

CPESC, headquartered in Marion, North Carolina, is a non-profit, professional international organization with about 2,000 members throughout the United States as well as several countries, including Canada. The organization was first formed in 1983 through SWCS and became incorporated three years ago.

USDA has signed agreements with 14 professional organizations, including two universities and a business. These agreements allow the organizations to recommend qualified individuals to USDA for certification to provide technical services in conservation planning and application.

Technical Service Provider Orientation Course Scheduled for Summer 2006

NRCS has developed a web-based orientation course that explains the technical service provider process, including roles and responsibilities. Estimated time for course completion ranges between five and seven hours, depending on level of knowledge about the TSP process and the agency.

The course will be mandatory for new technical service providers and those seeking certification renewals.

The course will include review questions and a final examination to help NRCS gauge its effectiveness. The agency

plans to unveil the course in May 2006. The course also will be designed for classroom presentation.

Topics will include:

1. roles and responsibilities of the technical service provider, the landowner and NRCS
2. certification categories and requirements
3. contracts and agreements with NRCS and landowners
4. marketing strategies
5. technical references and tools
6. where to get help

Technical service providers that are familiar with the process and have a solid knowledge of NRCS can go directly to the final examination. By making this course a pre-requisite for certification, NRCS will have an objective measure for “familiarity with NRCS” certification requirement.

Two NRCS Employees Join National Technical Service Provider Team

NRCS Program Analyst Barbara L. Eggers and NRCS Office Assistant Sharon Williams Hayden are the newest members on the National Technical Service Provider Team.

Eggers develops analytical tools, reports and educational materials about technical service providers. She also responds to inquiries and manages an assortment of data. Prior to joining the Technical Service Provider Team, she worked as an equal opportunity specialist with NRCS’ Civil Rights Division.

She began her career with NRCS as a soil conservation technician in Oklahoma. After entering the upward mobility program, and earning a degree in Agronomy, she was promoted to soil conservationist. She worked as a soil conservationist, district

conservationist, and RC&D coordinator in several locations in Oklahoma.

Before joining NRCS, Eggers worked for conservation districts in Texas and Oklahoma. She held several positions with the conservation districts in these two states—secretary, district technician and district manager.

Williams-Hayden provides clerical and administrative assistance to the national Technical Service Provider Team. Before joining NRCS, Sharon worked with GEICO Insurance Company and INTUIT Corporation as a customer service representative.

She earned an Associates degree in Secretarial Science from Norfolk State University in Norfolk, Va. and a Bachelors degree in Business Administration from Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, VA. Currently, she is pursuing her Master's degree in Business Administration at the same university.

Connect to TSP Express Online

Technical service providers can subscribe to TSP Express on the Internet. The electronic subscription service alerts computer users to these information products and includes a link to view and download.

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For More Information

For more information on technical service providers, visit the TechReg site at <http://techreg.usda.gov>; write to Angel Figueroa, National Technical Service Provider Team Leader, Science and Technology Deputy Area, USDA-NRCS, P.O. Box 2890, Washington, D.C. 20013-2890; phone: 202-720-6731, or e-mail at Angel.Figueroa@wdc.usda.gov.

State Technical Service Provider Contacts

<http://techreg.usda.gov/RptStateContact4Admin.aspx>

Your Feedback is Needed

This is the eighth issue of TSP Express, a report for technical services providers. We are seeking topics for future issues. Please send comments to tspg@nracs.usda.gov.

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