

## Program Description

September 2004

## ***Resource Conservation and Development Program***

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### ***Overview***

The Resource Conservation and Development Program (RC&D) is a voluntary program that helps people protect and develop their economic, natural, and social resources. Program objectives address improving the quality of life, including social, economic, and environmental concerns; continuing prudent use of natural resources; and strengthening local citizens' ability to use available sources of assistance through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other Federal agency partnerships. The program is administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), in cooperation with other USDA agencies.

### ***Authority***

The program began in February 1964 under authority of Section 102 of the Food and Agricultural Act of 1962 (P.L. 87-703) and other Departmental authorities. Sections 1528-1538 of the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981 have replaced these authorities. This act authorized a program to encourage and improve the capability of State and local units of government and local nonprofit organizations in rural areas to plan, develop, and implement programs for resource conservation and development. Through the establishment of RC&D areas, led by a council, the program establishes or improves coordination systems in rural communities and builds rural community leadership skills to effectively use Federal, State and local programs for the communities' benefit. The RC&D program was given permanent authority in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill).

### ***Scope***

The RC&D program is available in all 50 states, the Caribbean (Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands), and the Pacific Basin (Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa). Currently, 375 RC&D areas, designated by the Secretary of Agriculture, serve 2,709 counties across the Nation. The 1990 Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act limited assistance to not more than 450 active designated areas. Designated areas now serve approximately 85 percent of U.S. counties and 80 percent of the U.S. population. To participate, locally formed RC&D councils submit an application for designation through their NRCS State Conservationist to the Secretary of Agriculture.

### ***How RC&D Works***

An RC&D area covers several counties. It is locally defined and directed by a council that implements natural resource protection and wise use, accelerated economic development, and/or improvement of social conditions. The council consists of public and private sector sponsors and other local organizations that represent a diverse cross section of community interests. Sponsors include county and city governments, conservation districts, sub-state planning or economic districts, Tribal governments, and interested private organizations in the area. This grassroots involvement is highly valuable in shaping decision making at the local level. RC&D councils provide a way for people to plan and implement projects that will make their communities better places to live.

The council, with public involvement, identifies community concerns, needs, and problems. The council develops an area plan, with assistance from Federal agencies, that states goals, objectives, and action items to address the local community's priorities and concerns. Implementation of an action item may include one step or a full range of steps, such as problem analysis, development of alternatives, plan development, funding solicitation, and implementation.

NRCS provides program administration. Funds appropriated to NRCS by Congress provide for technical assistance in the form of a USDA RC&D coordinator to the council. Coordinators work closely with councils to develop and implement their area plans. The coordinator acts as a team coach, facilitator, liaison, and technical consultant to assist the council in its activities. The coordinator is a vital link between USDA and the RC&D council and its other partners. The goal is an empowered council that has the capacity to build effective public-private partnerships that result in strong rural community leadership and accomplishments.

Other USDA agencies also provide technical and financial assistance to RC&D councils. The RC&D councils rely on the USDA assistance to ensure that their efforts are technically sound and to leverage support from other sources. Councils also obtain the assistance of other local, State, and Federal agencies; private organizations; and foundations to carry out their projects. Thus, RC&D activities are broader than those created by assistance from USDA alone.

RC&D councils implement their area plans through projects that may include natural resource improvement, community improvement, forestry, education, economic development, water quantity and quality, recreation and tourism, marketing and merchandising, fish and wildlife habitat enhancement, and waste management and utilization.

Natural resource improvement projects include basic protection, such as soil erosion control, noxious plant and pest control, streambank improvement, preservation of prime farmland, composting, and mine reclamation; resource studies involving soil, water, plants, and wildlife; energy conservation and alternative sources of energy, such as biomass other than wood; and recycling of glass, metals, paper, and wood.

Community improvement projects address improving community infrastructure; performing studies on zoning and ordinances, facilities, or services needed; constructing and improving public trails; and installing public resources. These can include building community centers; improving old community buildings; constructing, improving, or repairing subsidized housing (apartments, single family homes, halfway houses, retirement homes); improving roads; improving and restoring parks and walking and bike trails; and installing dry fire hydrants.

Forestry projects include performing environmental improvements on forested areas; improving management of forests through such measures as land treatment for production; providing education on safety or harvesting techniques; developing or expanding forest related industries; developing energy sources, such as wood waste for energy; developing or improving value added forestry related products; applying agroforestry practices; establishing cooperatives; performing studies, such as forest, species, or forest products inventories; and improving rural road infrastructure with timber bridges.

Education projects cover environmental education, conservation studies, and RC&D council awareness. Projects include outdoor classrooms; public school programs; job training programs; community awareness activities; agriculture and forestry demonstrations; equipment and technique demonstrations for such products as no-till

drills or specialized tree planters; organizing community events such as fairs or rallies; preparing brochures, videos, or displays; and disseminating information about the RC&D program.

Economic development projects include studies, such as producer surveys, marketing surveys, or feasibility studies; assisting with grants, loans, or other financing; assisting in the formation or expansion of agriculture or natural resource related businesses, such as farm equipment or other agriculture related suppliers, manufacturing, bed and breakfast/motel, or other businesses involved with value-added products. Projects can include improvement of agricultural production, such as diversifying farm incomes and developing alternative markets for products.

Water projects are aimed at the improvement of surface and groundwater quality and quantity. Many deal with pollution control and dispersing water. Projects include watershed management; construction or rehabilitation of irrigation, flood control, and water drainage systems; construction or rehabilitation of aquaculture, wastewater treatment, and purification operations; installation of buffer strips; and efficient use of aquifers.

Recreation and tourism projects include feasibility studies; establishment or improvement of water-based recreational areas for swimming, boating, canoeing, and boat launching; establishment or improvement of non-water-based recreational areas, such as golf courses, rodeo arenas, trails, and ball parks; historic site preservation; establishment or upgrades of tourist attractions; and development of promotional materials, such as brochures, place mats, or commercials, for local tourist attractions.

Marketing and merchandising projects include studies, formation of cooperatives or associations, development of business or marketing plans, and development of

advertising and promotional materials for businesses.

Fish and wildlife projects concentrate on the protection, improvement, or development of fish and wildlife habitat.

Waste and waste utilization projects include efficient and environmentally sound disposal of animal waste, development or improvement of a landfill, waste collection, solid waste disposal, and composting.

***Where to find more information about RC&D***

More information on the RC&D program and linkages to individual RC&D council home pages can be found on the NRCS RC&D home page at <http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/RCCD/homepag3.htm>. For more information on how to form an RC&D council and apply for assistance, contact your local NRCS state office.



Visit USDA on the Web at:  
<http://www.usda.gov/farmbill>

**Note:** This is not intended to be a definitive interpretation of farm legislation. Rather, it is preliminary and may change as USDA develops implementing policies and procedures. Please check back for updates.