



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

June 2006



The Earth Team

Guide for New Volunteer Coordinators



*Helping
People
Help
the Land*

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or a part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410 or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.



Congratulations! You have just become an Earth Team Volunteer Coordinator

- You may have applied for the job or were assigned the responsibility.
- You may be the coordinator at the State, area, or “other” level.
- You apparently have a supervisor or mentor who has enough confidence in you to assign this responsibility.
- You may also have a lot of questions about how to be successful as a Volunteer Coordinator.

No matter what circumstances transpired to place you as “Earth Team Coordinator,” you are in for a rewarding experience. Most of your fellow coordinators are creative, outgoing, positive people. It’s contagious!

The volunteers you will associate with will also enrich your life — that’s a guarantee! You will extend your network and meet new people from top managers in NRCS to others who will contribute to your skills and knowledge. Take advantage of the unique opportunity now before you.

So let’s get started...the information included in this document, and how you use it, can provide you with a “jump start” to success. It can provide you with some directions to follow and it should answer several questions you may already have. Welcome and Good Luck!

The Earth Team — What’s it all about?

Volunteers help to support and accomplish the mission, vision, goals, and daily workload of NRCS (and sometimes the work of partners and sister agencies).

To understand how volunteers can become an integral part of NRCS operations, it is important to have a working knowledge of NRCS programs, priorities and workload.

It is a big job and NRCS can’t do it alone — no matter how large the staff or budget. We must employ the special skills and talents of other individuals and groups to provide quality service to our growing customer base.



Origin:

Volunteering has always been a cornerstone of the soil and water conservation movement. It began with the organization of conservation districts in 1937. In recognition of the interest and skills many Americans have in conservation, Congress passed legislation — Section 1526 of PL 97-98, Food and Agriculture Act — in 1981 permitting the Natural Resources Conservation Service to use volunteers in its programs. This is how the Earth Team, the volunteer arm of the NRCS, was initiated.

Purpose!

The primary purpose of the Earth Team is to expand NRCS services by using volunteer time, talent and energy to help accomplish the NRCS mission.

To better understand how volunteers fit into the structure of NRCS, let's look at the objectives of the Earth Team.

- To increase natural resources conservation by using volunteers to assist with the technical aspects of applying conservation practices
- To increase the level of support services available for conservation related activities with the help of volunteers in NRCS offices.
- To work with volunteers to increase public awareness through information and education.
- To identify potential career employees
- To use volunteer contacts to improve networking with other agencies and organizations in support of natural resource conservation objectives.
- To increase interest in, and acceptance of, resource management systems that conserve soil, water, and related natural resources.
- To establish a successful, long-range volunteer program.
- To be part of NRCS' outreach effort to diversify the workforce.



Benefits to you of being an Earth Team Volunteer Coordinator

Your first reward should be the realization that you are helping to get conservation on the land. Your contribution is a direct link in the volunteer process that helps NRCS get its work done.

You will also meet new people (volunteers, partners, NRCS staff) who bring some unique talents and skills to our agency. Many of your experiences will lead to life-long friendships. Many of your Earth Team experiences will enrich your life, and usually the experience for volunteers will be positive and beneficial. Often, association with NRCS and people like you has changed the direction of a volunteer's life. It is generally a "win-win-win" situation. Volunteers benefit, you benefit, our agency benefits.

A major benefit for you is the association with a unique group of NRCS professionals — your fellow Earth Team Volunteer Coordinators. They will help you and add new dimensions to your career and personal growth.

Many people care about you and the Earth Team

Management at all levels cares about your success and the role of the Earth Team.

Your fellow Earth Team Volunteer Coordinators care, understand and are willing to share their skills and experiences to help you.

Earth Team Volunteers care deeply. They sincerely want to help.

Your fellow Americans care, too. Over 80 percent of adults volunteer in the United States and "conservation" and "environment" are popular causes. The vast majority of Americans support our efforts to sustain natural resources on private lands.

Ways to Succeed as an Earth Team Volunteer Coordinator

Know the objectives of the Earth Team and NRCS. An understanding of the Earth Team purpose and how it is an integral part of daily operations is essential.

Be a subject matter expert. Know the “nuts and bolts” of the Earth Team such as:

- Developing a budget — see “sample budget” Appendix A
- Awards and recognition process — GM 360, Part 428-60
- Promotional material
- Needs Assessment — sample located in the Earth Team Handbook (page 5)
- Policy and procedures guidance — GM 360, Part 428
- Recruitment — Earth Team Handbook (pages 8-13)

Build an Earth Team Volunteer Coordinator “support system.” Three important cornerstones to this system include:

- Networking
- Keeping management informed
- Building program identity/visibility

Lets look at these three in detail:

Networking

Camaraderie among Earth Team Volunteer Coordinators is excellent. Take advantage of this situation. Get to know other coordinators at all levels. They generally are helpful, sharing and caring people. Don’t go at it alone – get to know the staff at the National Earth Team Office, the National Volunteer Coordinator, and other State/area volunteer coordinators.

In addition, it is important to develop volunteer contacts other than NRCS. Volunteering is big business — it is organized, financed, and supported in the public and private sector. Seek the advice of other volunteer management professionals, attend outside meetings, and ask a lot of questions.

Keep Management Informed

Management support for the Earth Team is essential. Managers who realize Earth Team volunteers can help them attain their goals will be your biggest supporters. Attend staff meetings and share volunteer success stories, and share facts and data that will “sell” the volunteer program. Get others to share success stories — there is nothing like having a manager or leader stand up and attest to the successful association with Earth Team volunteers. Always keep top management informed about your progress and accomplishments.

Building Program Identity/Visibility

No matter how “good” it is, maintaining the strength and integrity of the Earth Team requires a continual effort to promote an awareness of its existence. Several different communication and marketing tools and methods will be needed to create an awareness and understanding of the Earth Team by our employees, partners, and volunteers. One of the best but often overlooked tools is sharing success stories in staff meetings, through e-mail, in newsletters. The “VolunteerVoice” is an Earth Team newsletter available to all employees via the web page. Don’t overlook this outlet to share ideas and stories.

There are also brochures, fact sheets, displays and other promotional items available for your use. Visit the Earth Team Web page which can be found on the National NRCS web site. In addition, contact the National Earth Team Office for the latest material.



More on Being a Successful Earth Team Coordinator

Your enthusiasm for the Earth Team is mandatory. It is contagious and immediately perceived by others. Don't hide your enthusiasm, share it — you'll be pleased at the results.

You must also exhibit a personal commitment to the Earth Team. Volunteer for the Earth Team or for other causes. Employ a volunteer to help you. Help others with needs assessments and recruiting and managing volunteers.

Talk "Earth Team volunteers" every chance you can. Don't feel shy. Keep an Earth Team presence alive at staff meetings and casual encounters as often as possible.

Attend as many volunteer meetings and events as you can. NRCS Earth Team Volunteer Coordinators usually have multi-state, regional and national meetings. Your attendance will help you, others, and the program.

As mentioned earlier, learn as much as you can about the Earth Team. You are the source of information in your state about policy, procedure, and the details about this activity. Keep a set of references handy and always answer any questions that may arise.

Becoming a successful Earth Team manager takes time. Keep looking for the positive, successful contribution you can make. Be patient — the road to success often includes some "baby steps" along the way.

Potholes, roadblocks, pitfalls and other obstacles to avoid and be aware of!

Will there be any “bumps” in the road? You bet. Here are a few you may run across:

- Lack of imagination (how do I use volunteers)
- Resistance to change (never done this before)
- Afraid to ask for help
- People “think” they...
 - Don’t have time to train
 - Don’t have space for another person
 - Don’t have trainer skills
- Can’t get quality help without paying for it
- Don’t trust “outsiders” (not operating outside the box)
- Do not recognize volunteers as resource tools
- Perception that management doesn’t care
- Only assigning small/”busy” work, not complicated or abstract tasks
- Can’t recruit in rural areas
- Don’t need more work

Remember, most of the obstacles in your road to success are internal in nature...the positive attitude of most volunteers is easier to deal with.

So...what should I do next?

By now you should have a few answers and some questions. Many new Earth Team Volunteer Coordinators have been successful by outlining a plan or a “roadmap” to guide them. The following is one sample:

Sample Action Plan

1-2 Months

- Meet with the state conservationist, assistant state conservationist, and/or others to discuss program direction, guidelines, supervision, etc.
- Review previous status reports to see who is using the volunteer program; trends, statistics, etc.
- Review the Earth Team Coordinator Guide (you’re reading it now!)
- Be able to discuss policy and procedures
- Contact one other experienced state or area volunteer coordinator for training (find out what they are doing)
- Begin using the Earth Team Volunteer database system
- Call your state volunteer coordinator or the National Earth Team Office Staff if you haven’t heard from them already

3-5 Months

- Contact another volunteer coordinator of equal responsibility to find out what they’re doing
- Develop a list of external resources (volunteer pools, other agencies, etc.) and begin using them
- Complete a needs assessment, if not done in the last 12 months
- Give key staff an Earth Team update by attending a meeting once a quarter
- Find out when the next state/regional/national Earth Team meeting will be held and make plans to attend
- Consider attending the National Points of Light Annual Conference, etc.

- Assess status of promotional materials and include needs in budget.
- Develop a business plan in cooperation with area and field volunteer coordinators.
- Review business plan with key staff and have it approved by state conservationist/assistant state conservationist.
- Develop a budget in cooperation with state conservationist/assistant state conservationist.
- Hold a meeting with district conservationists in your state to evaluate their programs and address:
 1. Where they are
 2. Where they can go
 3. Where you and they see the Earth Team Program fitting into field operations
 4. Recruitment successes and needs
 5. Business plan items

6-8 Months

- Promote program through face-to-face contacts with field personnel
- Recruit a volunteer if you don't already have one
- Meet with state conservationist/assistant state conservationist to go over:
 1. Where we've been
 2. Where we can go
 3. Where you see the Earth Team program in the state/region
- Meet with Area/Field Volunteer Coordinators in state to evaluate
 1. Where we've been
 2. Where we can go
 3. Where you see the Earth Team program in the area/field

9-12 Months

- Review promotional fact sheets, brochures and circulate them to the field
- Reproduce existing support materials as needed
- Communicate availability of new promotional items (displays, publications, brochures, flyers, etc.) to field coordinators

- Use photos of volunteers at work to update current displays
- Send “VolunteerVoice” articles to the national volunteer coordinator
- Develop an awards program within your area of responsibility (state/area)
- Participate in national Earth Team awards process

From your first month on the job – use every opportunity to enlighten others about the value of using Earth Team volunteers.

References

- General Manual, Title 360, Part 428
- Earth Team Web Page (<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/feature/volunteers/>)
 - Earth Team Volunteer Handbook For Volunteer Supervisors
 - Earth Team Volunteer Orientation Guide
 - Earth Team Fact Sheets
- Volunteer.Gov/Gov Web Page
- Earth Team Volunteer Database (<http://earthteambd.sc.egov.usda.gov/>)

Measuring Earth Team Success

Neither numbers nor detailed success stories can be a true measure alone. Both are needed.

Let's look at some indicators:

- Volunteers contributing more to agency goals and priorities (as described in success stories)
- Number of volunteers and hours increase
- Earth Team has greater visibility and awareness
- More offices using volunteers
- Increased management support:
 - Increased budget
 - State awards
 - Included in speeches by key staff
 - Newsletter
 - Volunteer in management offices
 - Managers attend volunteer meetings
 - Management takes active role in my responsibilities
 - State received national recognition

We're glad you're part of the team! Remember that you have joined the Earth Team ranks and we are all here to help you. Good luck in your new role!

Appendix A

United States Department of Agriculture



Natural Resources Conservation Service
5140 Park Avenue, Suite C
Des Moines, IA 50321
Ph: 515/289-0325

DATE: August 16, 2005 **FILE CODE:** 260

TO: State Conservationist

FROM: State Volunteer Coordinator

SUBJECT: INF – 2006 Budget Request for National Earth Team

FY06 State Earth Team Budget Request = \$11,000.00.

- \$2,000 State Coordinator Travel (Attend and market Earth Team at various conferences and provide training to area and field staff that will increase the number of volunteers.)
- \$1,000 Awards (Purchase and engrave State Earth Team Awards.)
- \$2,000 Promotional Items (Distribute to volunteers and staff.)
- \$6,000 Regional/National Earth Team Training Meetings (The regional/national meeting allow staff to obtain current information about program regulations and direction. Due to the fact that these positions are collateral duty it is important that the area and state coordinators attend this training.)

Appendix A

EARTH TEAM VOLUNTEER FY06 BUDGET

Budgeted Item	Budgeted Amount	Obligated Amount	Remaining Amount
Supplies (Awards for recognition, promotional items, exhibits)	\$1,500.00		
Annual NACD/NRCS Awards includes plaque and up to 10 volunteers	\$375.00		
banquet reservations			
Award for Volunteer Coordinator			
Award for Winning County			
Incidental Expenses for Volunteers (lunches, mileage, etc.)	\$1,500.00		
National Volunteer Week Activities	\$1,200.00		
Travel for Regional Earth Team Coordinators Training Conference (4 attendees)	\$4,500.00		
TOTAL	\$9,075.00		

Helping People Help the Land