

Vision

Mission

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Vision: Productive Lands—Healthy Environment

The foundation of this strategic plan is a vision of the landscape that Americans want—a landscape in which a productive agricultural sector and a high-quality environment are both achieved.

Productive use of privately owned cropland, rangeland, pastureland, and forestland is essential to the Nation's security and the health and well-being of its citizens. Those lands form the foundation of a substantial and vibrant agricultural economy that provides food, fiber, forest products, and energy for the Nation. Those lands can also produce environmental benefits that people need—clean and abundant water, clean air, and healthy ecosystems. Two-thirds of the Nation is in agricultural and forest use and the management of these lands affects the quality of the environment for everyone.

America's farmers, ranchers, woodlot owners, and others involved in America's working lands strive to produce the multiple benefits that the Nation wants from privately owned land. They do not work in isolation. The Nation's growing population and economy are making the landscape a mosaic of agricultural and developed areas. In this dynamic landscape of changing land uses, conservation is everyone's responsibility. Maintaining productive land in harmony with a quality environment is possible if all the people who live on the land see themselves as members of interdependent communities who have responsibilities to their neighbors and responsibilities for the condition of their community. Where natural resource use and management are compatible with the framework of the natural systems of the land, agricultural production can continue unhindered, watersheds can function, wildlife populations can flourish, communities can prosper, and new and old residents alike can enjoy a quality environment.



NRCS District Conservationist discusses a conservation plan with a Virginia landowner.



Mission: Helping People Help the Land

NRCS provides products and services that enable people to be good stewards of the Nation's soil, water, and related natural resources on non-Federal lands.

With our help, people are better able to conserve, maintain, or improve their natural resources. This good stewardship involves actions to:

- Maintain the condition of the land through continued good management where adequate conservation is already in place.
- Prevent damage to the land where assessment of social, economic, and environmental trends indicates potential for environmental degradation.
- Enhance the land for further productivity and environmental health.
- Restore the land to health where damage to natural resources has already occurred.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), is a technical Agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). NRCS was established in 1935 as the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) to carry out a continuing program of soil and water conservation. The Secretary of Agriculture organized NRCS in 1994 through authority provided in the Federal Crop Insurance Reform and the Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994. NRCS combines the authorities of the former SCS as well as additional programs that provide financial assistance for natural resource conservation.

NRCS' role is to provide technical and financial assistance to help our customers care for the land. As a result of our assistance, land managers and communities take a comprehensive approach to the use and protection of soil, water, and related resources in rural, suburban, urban, and developing areas.

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 living, sustainable system that provides a high standard of living and quality of life today and for future generations.



Customers

We serve, either directly or indirectly, all people of the Nation. However, the people who make decisions about natural resource use and management on non-Federal lands are our primary customers. We provide the technical assistance and science-based information that these stewards want to make good decisions about their natural resources.

Our primary customers:

- Farmers and ranchers, people who own, operate, or live on farms and ranches.
- Other members of the private sector who support production agriculture and natural resource conservation.
- Governments and units of government with responsibility for natural resource use and management.
- Non-profit organizations whose mission aligns with aspects of natural resource management.

These major customer types ask for different products and services, delivered in different ways. Within each major customer category, there are customer segments with different needs.

Most of the 12,000 NRCS employees work in nearly 2,900 field offices across the Nation, providing services directly to our customers. Field office staff work side-by-side with employees of the local conservation district and State conservation agency. Field offices act as local clearinghouses for natural resource information, helping people gain access to knowledge and assistance available from many sources. Working one-on-one with landowners and other land managers, field office employees provide the technical expertise for conservation planning and design that enables land managers to balance their economic goals with the needs of the natural environment, creating sustainable systems that not only produce abundant crops and livestock, but also a quality environment.

Field office employees are supported by NRCS employees in other offices that provide technical and administrative support, conduct natural resource inventories, and develop new conservation technologies. NRCS State offices manage Agency programs in each State and coordinate Agency activities with the natural resource programs and priorities of State agencies and other Federal agencies. A framework of headquarters, divisions, six national centers, and three national technology support centers ensures that the Agency maintains the ability to consistently provide high-quality, cutting-edge technology.



NRCS District Conservationist discusses wetlands conservation with landowners.

Guiding Principles

Three fundamental principles guide how NRCS conducts business today and will continue to conduct business in the future.

Service:

Our customers are entitled to the best service we can provide. We respect the dignity and worth of every person we work with, treat all individuals fairly and equitably, listen to their views, and respond with assistance tailored to their needs. We believe that private land users will make responsible resource management decisions when equipped with appropriate data, technical assistance, and incentives. Our appreciation of the needs of people is as important to successful conservation efforts as is our understanding of natural resources. We continually strive to anticipate the public need and improve our service, and we measure our efforts against the highest professional standards.



Partnership:

Conservation can be achieved only by the cooperative effort of agencies, organizations, and individuals across the Nation. We value our relationships with other Federal, State, local, and Tribal resource agencies and organizations that share common objectives, although our missions may differ. We recognize that our traditional partners—local conservation districts, State conservation agencies, and Resource Conservation and Development Councils (RC&D)—have been key to past successes and remain essential to future progress in conservation. We maintain a government-to-government relationship with American Indian nations. We will bring in new partners to work toward common conservation goals. Local leadership and local action—neighbors working together—form the foundation for effective land stewardship. We foster the discussions needed to bring people together in a shared vision for their land and communities.

Technical Excellence:

Effective stewardship depends on having science-based information and technology that are up-to-date, easily accessible, and designed to meet user needs.

We satisfy a broad range of technology and information needs—from conservation “how-tos” for the homeowner to technical standards and tools for conservation professionals. We design conservation practices that help private landowners and managers achieve personal conservation and production goals and meet their community’s environmental expectations. NRCS technical standards for soil science and soil surveys, conservation engineering, and other specialties are recognized and shared world-wide. Our National Resources Inventory and Soil Survey databases help scientists and policy makers track natural resource conditions and trends, information that is essential to conservation policy and program development.

NRCS’ success depends upon the technical expertise of its employees and volunteers and upon their ability to work effectively with our diverse customer base. To ensure that all our employees acquire and maintain the skills to be successful, we provide appropriate training in management, technical, and other disciplines.

We provide our workforce the best work environment possible by creating a culture and climate that welcomes diversity, encourages innovation and self-development, and rewards creativity and achievement. We help our partners and volunteers develop and maintain the technical skills needed to provide high-quality service, and we ensure that private-sector technical service providers who help implement our programs work to the same standards as NRCS employees.



In fulfilling its stated mission, NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to land owners and managers. This technical and financial assistance is delivered through five business lines. Business lines are groups of similar products and services that Agency employees deliver to external customers. There are 15 core products and services under the business lines.

Business Line	Description
Conservation Planning and Technical Consultation	<p>NRCS provides data, information, or technical expertise that helps people collect and analyze information to identify natural resource problems and opportunities, clarify their objectives, and formulate and evaluate alternatives.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservation Plans reflect a customer’s decisions about the management of natural resources for a specific area—which may be a farm or ranch operating unit, a group of units, a community, or a landscape feature such as a watershed. • Technical Consultations and Planning Assistance provide professional advice that helps customers make decisions about natural resource management.
Conservation Implementation	<p>NRCS helps customers install on their land conservation practices and systems that meet established technical standards and specifications.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designs allow for the application of engineering and management practices (practice survey, practice design, field layout of conservation practices, and so forth). • Follow-up ensures the treatment is working properly and identifies if additional treatment is needed. • Checks and Reviews are formal program status reviews of land where program contracts are in effect or subject to conservation compliance.
Natural Resource Inventory and Assessment	<p>NRCS assesses, acquires, develops, interprets, analyzes, and delivers natural resource data and information to enable knowledge-based natural resource planning and decision making at all landscape scales.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data Gathering Protocols ensure that reliable natural-resource data are acquired and delivered. • Databases and Delivery include the maintenance and delivery of geospatial datasets and information. • Assessments and Analyses include the modeling and interpretation of natural resource data to better inform decision makers and facilitate policy development.
Natural Resource Technology Transfer	<p>NRCS develops, documents, and distributes a wide array of technology pertaining to resource assessment, conservation planning, and conservation system installation and evaluation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology Tools include conservation standards, specifications, guides and references, and modeling systems. NRCS has automated much of this technology to facilitate sound conservation decisions by the public. • Training and Certification include technical training to external customers and administration of certification standards and procedures. • Plant Materials and related technologies provide for better land treatment.
Financial Assistance	<p>NRCS provides financial assistance to encourage the adoption of land treatment practices that have been proven to provide significant benefits to the public. Financial assistance is awarded to participants who voluntarily enter into contracts, easements, and agreements to conserve natural resources. Financial assistance is provided through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost-share/Incentives; • Easements; • Grants; and • Stewardship Payments.



Overarching Strategies

NRCS activities are guided by broad, unifying strategies that are consistent with our guiding principles. For the period of this strategic plan, we have defined three general strategies. In the next 5 years, we will:

- Seek and promote cooperative efforts to achieve conservation goals.
- Provide information and assistance to encourage and enable locally led, watershed-scale conservation.
- Facilitate the growth of market-based opportunities that encourage business and industry to invest in conservation on private lands.

The first two of these strategies are not new for the Agency. Our activities have always been cooperative efforts that involved many partners, and we have long emphasized the importance of managing natural resources in terms of the natural divisions and processes of the landscape. The emphasis on the market-based approach is new, although market principles have been utilized, to a limited degree, in financial assistance programs.

The three strategies are inter-related and will be implemented as a seamless process. In the upcoming 5 years, we will:

- Pursue partnerships that encourage the private sector to invest in conservation;
- Strengthen our technical capacity to enable the private sector to invest in conservation on private lands; and
- Encourage market-based pilot projects that test new and innovative conservation technology within the private sector.



Locally led, watershed-scale conservation is an overarching strategy of NRCS.

Cooperative Conservation

We believe that enduring conservation is achieved only by the cooperative efforts of individuals, agencies, and organizations across the Nation. For over 70 years, NRCS has worked cooperatively with its partners to help people get conservation on the land.

NRCS, conservation districts, State conservation agencies, and RC&D councils represent a unique Federal, State, and local partnership dedicated to natural resource conservation. The one-on-one assistance this partnership provides to farmers and ranchers forms a foundation for cooperative conservation. Known and trusted by landowners,

managers, and officials at the local level, we are able to facilitate locally led conservation efforts that meet local goals and serve the broader national interest.

Today, there is growing appreciation for the effectiveness of cooperative approaches that conserve and protect natural resources. We will use our experience and network of partnerships to reach new partners and open channels of communication among stakeholders at all levels. Increasing our cooperative conservation efforts will require that we strengthen certain Agency business lines and human capital development efforts. We will:

- Increase our investment in developing the resource information and analytical and planning tools that cooperating agencies and organizations, State and local governments, and Tribes can use to reach consensus on natural resource goals and take action to achieve their goals.
- Expand our efforts to broaden the conservation partnership and build new alliances. We will conduct a dialog with our conservation partners to develop strategies to make our joint actions more efficient.
- Enable strong local conservation leadership, working with partners who have responsibility for State and



local long-range planning, in Nation-to-Nation relationships with Tribes, and with local organizations that have a stake in natural resource conservation.

- Improve the quality of cooperative conservation programs and initiatives by playing a more proactive role in providing technical advice in decision-making arenas at all levels.
- Commit the resources needed to enable staff to develop the necessary skills to serve as catalysts and coordinators at the local level. Cooperative conservation—building coalitions—requires a substantial investment of staff time to work with stakeholders to define conditions, foster communication among all parties, and inform people on the issues and options.
- Improve skills required to facilitate cooperative conservation activities through hiring and employee development and reward employees for achievements in cooperative ventures.
- Collaborate with Federal, Tribal, and State agencies as well as others with natural resource management

responsibilities to coordinate program development and delivery, and to accelerate cooperative conservation at the local level.

- Pursue partnerships with varied interests, to strengthen and collaborate in research efforts and to encourage pilot efforts in areas of resource concern, new to NRCS such as air quality, invasive species, and energy conservation.

Watershed Approach

We believe that a locally led, watershed-based approach to resource management on private lands is key to conserving natural resources. This approach will benefit both inland and coastal communities.

Decisions about the use and management of natural resources are best made by focusing on the functioning of natural systems within a landscape. Watersheds provide the context within which we can meaningfully evaluate aquatic habitats and the movement of water, nutrients, sediment, and energy through the landscape. They are universal, well-defined areas that provide a common basis for discussion of water, related resources, and landscape processes.

By using a cooperative, scientifically-based watershed approach, we will help ensure the most productive use of financial investments that address water quality, water supply, flooding, and aquatic habitat conservation. Managing our programs at the watershed level will provide a way to integrate NRCS program activities with other Federal, Tribal, State, and local activities to achieve the greatest results.

Protecting watershed health begins with a local commitment to joint action to prevent or solve a resource problem of major community importance. Where local communities have developed a vision for their local watershed and reached consensus on priorities for action, we can tailor assistance to meet those priority needs. In communities where a vision has not been developed, we will promote the concept of watershed planning. When helping local leaders assess conditions and evaluate options, NRCS provides information about how the local watershed affects, and is affected by, conditions and events in other parts of the larger watershed or river basin system of which it is a part.



We are committed to providing services on a watershed basis to enable people to assess their natural resource conditions, evaluate alternatives, implement solutions, and measure success.

Providing assistance on a watershed basis requires that we enhance products in our inventory and assessment and technology transfer business lines, and that we strengthen our capability to provide watershed planning assistance and technical consultations with communities and groups. It does not require the

development of new business lines or changes in our organizational structure. We will:

- Invest in employee development, technology development, and data collection that will be needed to enable the watershed approach to succeed for both inland and coastal communities.
- Enhance Agency capability to provide data at a variety of watershed scales and to assist in analyzing data. Watershed-scale planning requires data and analytical tools to help assess

conditions, analyze options, and develop consensus on solutions.

- Enable Agency staff to develop the necessary skills to serve as catalysts for watershed plans. Facilitating local efforts on a watershed basis requires a substantial investment of staff time in working with stakeholders, as well as a high degree of expertise in a wide range of technical disciplines.
- Utilize a progressive and iterative approach to watershed-scale planning. Planning assistance occurs



The best natural resources decision-making focuses on the function of natural systems.

along a continuum and can be provided at various levels of intensity, depending on the scope and complexity of the resource problems, the target audience, available technologies, and local interest and commitment.

- Utilize rapid watershed assessments to evaluate natural resource conditions and tailor the delivery of NRCS services on a watershed basis. Technical

and financial assistance may be available to assist local groups in rapid watershed assessment. Rapid watershed assessment will be used as a platform for conservation program delivery.

- Utilize the multi-disciplinary expertise of NRCS employees and partners to expand the local delivery system and initiate cross-agency coordination for technology

transfer, data access and development, and technology development.

- Develop improved indices for watershed baseline conditions, and strengthen our ability to measure the effects of conservation treatment on watershed health.
- Collect data and document conservation practice and program results by watershed boundaries in addition to State and county boundaries.

Upland terraces control soil erosion in a small watershed project.





Market-based Approach

We believe that the voluntary, incentive-based approach is the most effective method of achieving sound resource management and conservation on private lands.

Americans value the environment. They want clean water, clean air, and healthy wildlife populations. And they are willing to invest in protecting the things they value. People in many kinds of private-sector organizations

contribute money to improve local streams, preserve land, and protect wildlife.

Lack of reliable information about the benefits produced by specific conservation actions hinders development of environmental markets. To ensure that government programs provide the best return on taxpayers investments in conservation, natural resources agencies are quantifying the environmental effects of conservation actions and comparing the benefits and costs of management options. Reliable information is not only improving the management of public programs but creating opportunities for markets to play a role in accelerating conservation on private land.

Markets for some types of environmental credits already exist. Opportunities for farmers and ranchers to participate in environmental credit trading for reduction of total maximum daily loads (TMDL) pollutants and for carbon sequestration are expected to increase. In the future, businesses or private organizations may be able to buy credits for clean water, greenhouse gases, or wetlands as easily as investors buy corn or soybeans today.



Conducting a water test in the Native Alaskan village of Nanwalek.



This type of approach leverages conservation payments from the private sector, replacing the need for public program dollars. We will promote the use of environmental credit trading and voluntary reporting registries.

Credit trading, however, is only one way we will introduce market principles into public investment in conservation. We will focus on developing and implementing innovative, market-based approaches within the context of existing programs and activities. We will:

- Help provide the information necessary for markets to function by increasing our investment in the technology and research needed to evaluate and measure benefits and costs of conservation treatment. Consistent and reliable measurements of conservation benefits will encourage private investment.
- Establish the National Natural Resources Conservation Foundation to help support development of innovative technology that has not yet matured to

the point that public funds should be invested.

- Work with partners to identify and assess opportunities for private sector investment in community-based conservation. For example, a city could weigh the cost of treatment facilities against the cost of applying conservation on the land in the watershed, as did the New York City Watershed, and buy the least costly option.
- Apply a market-based approach to participation in conservation programs, recognizing that the transfer of public funds to program participants can be treated as a market transaction—a willing buyer purchasing a defined product from a willing seller for a mutually satisfactory price.
- Ensure that a market-based approach is used to determine the proper level of public investment in any conservation effort.
- Identify situations in which innovative thinking can create conservation projects that serve multiple purposes, with the benefits received by one party

becoming the source of incentives for others to work on the cooperative undertaking. For example, farmers in the upper Mississippi can protect water quality by plugging tile drains over the winter to prevent the off-site delivery of nitrogen. Hunting groups could pay the cost of the temporary plugging in order to improve habitat for ducks and enhance their hunting experience.

- Enable greater efficiency in market-based conservation efforts that have long been conducted by the private sector.
- Strengthen our internal capability to facilitate market-based conservation by:
 - Conducting outreach, education, technology transfer, and partnership-building activities.
 - Conducting pilots to stimulate interest in market-based concepts.
 - Documenting and disseminating case studies to the work-force and potential new partners.
 - Creating a handbook and training materials on the market-based approach.



The Malpai Borderlands Group's GrassBank project is a locally-led, cooperative effort.



