

# Memo

To: Conservation Partners using the Common Computing Environment

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Date: 3/25/2008

Re: Computer Related Issues for the Conservation Partnership

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## **Computer Related Issues for the Conservation Partnership**

Due to the focus on protecting sensitive data, responding to emerging computing technologies, adapting to downward pressure on budgets, and many other issues related to our information technology system, the way we provision and use computers continues to evolve.

Members of the Conservation Partnership continue to coordinate solutions that optimize support to our members and their customers.

NRCS relies on conservation districts and other partners to deliver a substantial amount of local technical services to farmers and ranchers. The agency continues to reserve a segment of their computer capability for those districts using the Common Computing Environment (CCE) to aid in this process. While NRCS is committed to continuing that approach on a national basis, they have delegated to State Conservationists the responsibility to establish the appropriate arrangements that fit each state partnership and local conservation district situation.

USDA created an organization called the Information Technology Service (ITS) in 2004 to provide support to computer systems in field offices. ITS currently is the service provider for the county-based NRCS, FSA, and Rural Development service center agencies.

This year, NRCS is reducing the total number of computers they are supporting in their part of the USDA system. This effort reduces costs and provides for a refresh cycle in order to maintain up-to-date equipment.

The partners continue to work toward a long range goal of improving services to customers, including adopting the best technology to get conservation on the land. It is likely that this will involve more field-based mobile technologies and less office-based technologies in the future.

A national Conservation Partnership Information Technology Task Force meets regularly to provide guidance on these issues. Some of the individual partners are also developing tools and approaches that help move us towards this improvement goal. For example, you'll soon see the results of a partnership effort, led by NASCA and NRCS through a cooperative agreement, to develop a model interagency connectivity agreement that can serve as the basis for state level sharing agreements.

NACD recently established a small short-term task force to involve district leaders and partners in an assessment of the current situation with a charge of making recommendations by the July NACD Board of Directors meeting.

NRCS continues to analyze, design and upgrade the tools and approaches that all of the partners use to provide help to farmers and ranchers. They are even considering an approach to providing and supporting computing hardware and software on an annual fee basis through a process called "seat management."

As we continue to strive toward workable solutions, we will post details and updates on the Frequently Asked Questions page on NACD's website. See <http://www.nacdnet.org/resources/computers/faq.phtml> for answers to specific questions and further information as it becomes available.

Should you have questions, please email or call Steve Webber, NRCS IT Specialist, at (970) 295-5420 or [stephen.webber@ftc.usda.gov](mailto:stephen.webber@ftc.usda.gov).

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

**1. May a conservation district still buy a computer through/from the USDA contract?**

Yes, although the current forms still have 2007 listed on them, this is the current contract being used by USDA for field office computers. We will update our forms and website as soon as a new contract is available or USDA changes their approach.

**2. What other security requirements might we expect?**

In FY 2008, NRCS and partners with computers on the federal government network will be required to apply increased security measures including:

- Those with laptop or tablet computers must obtain a Lincpass Smartcard and card reader. The user will log in by swiping the Smartcard through the card reader and entering a PIN. This is called dual factor authentication.
- A full computer disk encryption will be applied to all CCE computers.
- A Federal Desktop Core Configuration (FDCC) image will be installed on all CCE computers, which will standardize the security on computers across the federal government.

**3. How many computers will be available for districts to use to provide services to farmers and ranchers?**

As mentioned in our March 20<sup>th</sup> memo, NRCS is committed nationally to having each conservation district on the system so that the data and technical tools to service farmers and ranchers is available to local office employees. These arrangements will vary by state and by specific conservation district needs. Therefore, it is important for districts in each state to communicate and work with state and federal partners on these matters.

**4. What are mobile technologies?**

We understand that conservation practice planning, design, and installation can usually be done most effectively on the farm and ranch with the producer. Laptop and tablet computers with wireless connections are now being used to provide many services directly while on the farm or ranch. In time, more and more technical conservation services will be provided in that manner. Increased use of mobile technologies is part of the Department's long range plans.

**5. What is an interconnectivity agreement?**

The interconnectivity agreement is a written document that establishes the terms, conditions, and safeguards in which conservation partners exchange data, files, and information between information systems and organizational units. Information sources may contain sensitive information, and the agreement ensures steps are taken to safeguard and protect it during the delivery and administration of conservation programs.

**6. What is the annual fee approach to charging for computers?**

The industry average for provisioning and supporting an employee a computer, the software on it, including word processing, spreadsheets, presentation, collaboration, database, e-mail, organizational business applications, security, and the requisite technical support, network and Internet access, phone, and conferencing services is about \$3,200 per year. This often is called "total cost of ownership" when an organization buys and supports an employee in-house.

However, many private and public sector organizations buy provisioning and support as a service rather than managing it in-house. NRCS and other USDA agencies are considering establishing a flat service fee and current estimates are about \$3,000, which also includes geographic information system (GIS) software licensing. The fee also would provide a new computer to the user every 3 to 5 years, and would provide for software upgrades on a fixed schedule. A commonly accepted term to describe this concept is "seat management."

**7. What should our district/state do today relative to computer support?**

We know that decisions on computer security, access and cost are being made now for many conservation districts, and many conservation districts feel that they cannot wait months for issues to be resolved. We understand your need to act as you see best to continue to provide services to customers.

At this time, NACD and NASCA ask conservation districts to talk with your state and federal partners. Become informed so that you can properly manage these changes, and avoid actions that fragment your local partnership, ultimately negatively affecting your customers.

**8. What is the history of the USDA Common Computing Environment (CCE)?**

From 2000 to 2007, Congress funded capital expenditures to modernize USDA service center agency offices including:

- a shared phone system;
- a shared local office computer network;
- high speed internet connections;
- common email;
- common computers and software;
- shared GIS data and servers; and
- orthoimagery and digitized field boundaries, soils, parcels, etc.

The central fund, called the Common Computing Environment (CCE), originally amounted to about \$60 million per year, declining in the past three years to \$43 million, \$20 million, and now zero. In the future, the agencies are expected to support the standard infrastructure out of their budgets.

Congress has not appropriated a separate central fund to support the infrastructure for FY 2008. However, NRCS will support existing computers, including the 3,500 plus computers assigned to district employees.

While it lasted, the CCE investment enabled NRCS to maintain and increase productivity and program delivery while keeping staffing numbers level. Without the fund, ways must be found to streamline computing services. Fortunately, it is likely there is a fundamental shift underway towards network-based computing, which is beginning to reduce reliance on a lot of hardware and other infrastructure in local offices.

**9. What is the current and anticipated level of ITS support to NRCS and its partners?**

Going into FY 2008, NRCS has paid OCIO-ITS to support slightly more than 22,000 computers assigned to about 15,700 NRCS and partner employees in about 3,000 locations. This payment includes the software, infrastructure, and technical support provided by more than 400 ITS employees in 200 locations. There is general agreement that the quality of service must be improved, and a primary way to do this is to reduce the number of computers to support.

In order to control future costs and improve the quality of support, NRCS currently is working with states and other agency organizational units to eliminate outdated and excess computers and reduce the inventory to approximately 18,000 computers assigned to agency and partner employees.

State and other agency organizational units (e.g. service centers, national headquarters, etc) have the discretion to pay for additional computers out of their individual budgets. The current estimated cost is \$3,000 per "seat."

Beginning in fiscal year 2009, NRCS anticipates having the budget to support a minimum of 18,000 computers. ***We can expect further budget clarity during the next few months and like most efforts this one will evolve and change between now and September 30, 2008.***

**10. How do I know when I get a new CCE computer with seat management?**

No CCE computer will be older than 5 years. The replacement of a CCE computer will be scheduled well in advance as the replacement process will occur throughout the year. In any one year, 20 percent of the older computers will be replaced. Of course, there will be a transition period going to the seat management model

Varying service levels may also be offered, giving managers the option to pay a higher seat cost for a three-year cycle, and perhaps a premium for a one-year replacement cycle.

**11. Why should I pay a seat cost when I just bought a new computer in 2007?**

During the transition period, it is likely that you will pay the seat cost minus the cost of the computer, which will cover the annual cost for software licensing and technical support. At some point, the hardware cost would be added back in.

**12. Why should I pay the same seat cost if I am operating a four-year-old computer and my neighbor has a brand new one?**

The intent is that this will balance out over time. When you get a new replacement computer, your neighbor's will be four years old.

**13. Why am I getting an old FSA computer when I thought it was NRCS that was supporting our share of IT costs?**

The hand-me-down approach will be minimized if not eliminated with seat management, with the terms written into the service level agreement.

We appreciate your patience, input, and feedback. We will keep you informed of our actions. Thank you for your leadership and commitment to maintaining an effective partnership to provide conservation services throughout the nation.