# Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977

## Fact Sheet

June 2009

## *16 U.S.C. §§ 2001-2009, November 18, 1977, as amended*

### *Overview*

The Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act (RCA) provides broad natural resource strategic assessment and planning authority for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The purpose of the RCA is to ensure that USDA programs for the conservation of soil, water, and related resources are responsive to the long-term needs of the Nation. USDA undertakes a partnership effort to conduct:

- A continuing Appraisal of the Nation's soil, water, and related resources. The Appraisal documents the current status and trends of soil, water, and related natural resources; the capability of these resources to meet current and projected demands; the effects of regulations, policies, and programs on these resources; and the cost and benefits of conservation measures applied under USDA conservation programs and alternative conservation approaches.

- A National Conservation Program (Program) to serve as a guide in carrying out USDA activities to assist landowners in conserving soil, water, and related resources on non-Federal land. The Program evaluates the Nation's natural resource problems; effectiveness of current authorities and programs; alternative methods for achieving conservation objectives; and costs and benefits of alternative conservation practices.

### *RCA Program Influence*

The first RCA Appraisal and Program, delivered to Congress in 1982, addressed key questions related to the availability and condition of land and water resources, considering pressures on the resource base resulting from consumption patterns, agricultural export trends, and population growth. The second RCA Appraisal and the updated Program built upon the issues addressed in the first RCA, and established erosion and water quality concerns as national priorities.

Numerous conservation strategies developed through the RCA process have been implemented through various Farm Bills since 1985. For example, alternative conservation approaches identified in RCA analyses have formed the foundation for conservation compliance, the Conservation Reserve Program, and the Conservation Stewardship Program, among others.

### *Legislative Changes*

Congress reauthorized the RCA in the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 − extending it through 2018. The reauthorization made targeted changes to the underlying statute in the following areas:

Congressional Findings:
- Places new emphasis on the importance of assessing conservation needs, evaluating the effects of conservation practices, and analyzing alternative approaches to conservation programs.

Appraisal:

- Expands the assessment to include data on conservation plans, conservation practices planned or implemented, environmental outcomes, economic costs, and related matters under conservation programs; and
- Calls for soliciting and evaluating recommendations for improving the Appraisal process.

Program:

- Clarifies that the evaluation of existing conservation programs should emphasize demonstration, innovation, and monitoring of specific program components in order to encourage further development and adoption of practices and performance-based standards;
- Requires a special evaluation of the challenges and opportunities for improving cropland soil quality; and
- Calls for soliciting and evaluating recommendations for improving the Program process.

Reports. Establishes a schedule for delivery of RCA reports to Congress as follows:

|  | *Initial Report* | *Update* |
|---|---|---|
| Appraisal | January 2011 | January 2016 |
| Program and Statement of Policy | January 2012 | January 2017 |
| Recommendations for Improvement | January 2012 | NA |

*More Information*

For more information on the RCA, contact:

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