



March 9, 2016

TO: All Conservation Partnership Employees

FROM: USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service  
National Association of Conservation Districts  
National Conservation District Employees Association  
National Association of State Conservation Agencies  
National Association of Resource and Development Councils

SUBJECT: National Conservation Planning Partnership

In 2015, the National Conservation Planning Partnership (NCP) was created by the five national conservation partners as a result of the renewed recognition of the critical role that conservation planning plays in advancing voluntary conservation efforts on private lands.

The NCP Leadership Team is comprised of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA), the National Conservation District Employees Association (NCDEA), and the National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils (NARC&DC).

The NCP Team has four overarching objectives:

- Reinvigorate conservation planning
- Improve the National Conservation Partnership's capacity to deliver conservation planning assistance
- Ensure the delivery of technically sound science-based assistance
- Build a workforce of strong conservation planners

As conservationists, we recognize the importance of conservation planning as part of the science-based process that supports landowners, land users, and other decision makers as they seek to address natural resource concerns and achieve their long-term conservation objectives while meeting their economic needs.

Prior to the 1985 Farm Bill, conservation planning was integral to our work in getting conservation on the ground. However, as programs were added and priorities changed, it has become challenging to provide this valuable service to our customers. Conservation planners on the 'front lines' have been juggling these various priorities, a number of which are not directly related to their core mission of being technical conservation leaders in their community. As the number and diversity of their priorities have increased so has the workload, which when coupled with the decrease in the number of staff in many locations, has put an unsustainable strain on conservation partnership employees.

As leaders of our National Conservation Partnership we have united to expand the ability of field conservationists to work with customers in developing and implementing conservation plans, ensure adequate time to be out on the land working with customers, and improve consistency in the planning process.

The NCP Leadership Team has been working over the past six months with the help of five sub committees which include:

- Communication and Messaging
- Partnership and Leveraging
- Technical Processes, Tools and Integration

- Training, Development and Certification
- Performance, Outcomes and Accountability

A critical component to this effort has been the initial feedback we have received from those working in the field, including some local conservation district officials. From these employees and district officials we heard a number of concerns regarding the following: a lack of adequate time for proper conservation planning; a need for sufficient training for conservation planners; and competent technical tools and processes. As a result, each of the sub committees are working to address these challenges and concerns within their focus areas and making recommendations for how to proceed.

The efforts below are currently underway or in process:

- Customer Service Toolkit updates that increase user productivity
- Conservation Desktop for Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative (CDSI) that integrate processes such as assessing soil erosion, wind erosion, etc.
- Program Support Specialists to assist field offices by completing administrative tasks related to contract management, allowing field staff more time in the field planning
- Document Management System, an electronic records management system to streamline the management of financial assistance contracts
- Roll-out of an expanded boot-camp training session that will expand on conservation planning to be held on a regional basis to increase participation for conservation district and NRCS employees
- A full time communications coordinator position

NCPP teams will continue to seek additional input from customers and employees during all phases of strategic planning, implementation and evaluation. Two immediate actions will be to survey our customers to determine their conservation planning needs and also to survey field employees to assess their ability and comfort level with the conservation planning process, which will help us determine training needs. The input from these surveys will help us develop a national multi-year comprehensive action plan. Later on states will be asked to develop state-level plans.

As the first Soil Conservation Service Chief Hugh Hammond Bennett stated, “There is no virtue in planning merely for the sake of planning. Unless plans can be translated into action, planning becomes a profitless mental exercise.”

This national effort is a collaborative call to action to ensure that conservation planning is the focal point that allows our customers to address their resource concerns while achieving their management and economic goals.

We will be providing you with regular updates on our progress. Thank you for all you do each day for our nation’s working lands and natural resources.

Sincerely,

Jason Weller, Chief, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Lee McDaniel, President, National Association of Conservation Districts

Olga Walter, President, National Association of Resource Conservation & Development Councils

Adrian Baber, President, National Association of State Conservation Agencies

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