The Natural Resources Conservation Service

Introduction

As USDA's lead private lands conservation agency, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical assistance and administers a wide range of programs to help solve this country's natural resource problems.

Our well-being depends on healthy, productive natural resources and their sustainable use. Just as soil, water, and habitat are interrelated, the programs that address these resources are interrelated, and programs that help one resource also benefit others. If you stop erosion, for example, you also enhance soil productivity and protect water and air quality. Improving the environment enhances the economic future of communities throughout the United States.

The mission of NRCS is to provide national leadership, in a partnership effort, to help people conserve, improve, and sustain the Nation's natural resources and environment.

A Partnership Approach to Resource Conservation

For more than six decades, NRCS employees have worked side by side with landowners, conservation districts, Resource Conservation and Development Councils, State and local governments, and urban and rural partners to restore and enhance the American landscape. The agency helps landowners and communities take a comprehensive approach in conservation planning, working toward an understanding of how all natural resources—soil, water, air, plants, animals—relate to each other and to humans. The agency works to solve the natural resource challenges on the Nation's private lands—reducing soil erosion, improving soil and rangeland health, protecting water quality and supply, conserving wetlands, and providing fish and wildlife habitat.

Most NRCS employees serve in USDA's network of local, county-based offices, including those in Puerto Rico and the Pacific Basin. The rest are at State, regional, and national offices, providing technology, policy, and administrative support. They serve all people who live and work on the land. Nearly three-fourths of the agency's technical assistance goes to helping farmers and ranchers develop conservation systems uniquely suited to their land and their ways of doing business.

The agency helps rural and urban communities curb erosion, conserve and protect water, and solve other resource problems. American Indian tribes, Alaska Natives, Pacific Islanders, and other native groups work with NRCS on a variety of initiatives that include resource inventories and the adaptation of conservation programs to fit the special needs of their people and their land. Also, countries around the globe seek NRCS advice on building their own conservation delivery systems and in coping with severe natural resource problems.

NRCS Conservation Technical Assistance

NRCS provides conservation technical assistance (CTA) to improve and conserve natural resources. This assistance is based on voluntary local landowner cooperation.

CTA is the foundation upon which NRCS delivers its services, through local conservation districts, to private landowners, communities, and others who care for natural resources. CTA is the intellectual capital of the agency; experts in soils and other physical and biological sciences, with knowledge of local conditions, work with private landowners in the stewardship of our natural resources.

CTA provides the infrastructure through which the agency is able to respond to a multitude of needs, from natural resource disasters to complex site specific natural resource problems. CTA is the means by which this Nation is able to voluntarily bring about land stewardship that improves our soil, water, wildlife, and air resources while providing for sustainable agricultural production. The investments in CTA return the American public significant benefits from an improved environment and quality of life to a safe and abundant food supply.

NRCS Programs

Following is an overview of NRCS programs:

Wetlands Reserve Program

The Wetlands Reserve Program is a voluntary program to restore wetlands. Participating landowners can establish conservation easements of either permanent or 30-year duration or can enter into restoration cost-share agreements where no easement is involved. In exchange for establishing a permanent easement, the landowner receives payment up to the agricultural value of the land and 100 percent of the restoration costs for restoring the wetland. The 30-year easement payment is 75 percent of what would be provided for a permanent easement on the same site and 75 percent of the restoration cost. The restoration cost-share agreements are for a minimum 10-year duration and provide for 75 percent of the cost of restoring the involved wetlands.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program works primarily in locally identified priority areas where there are significant natural resource concerns, such as soil erosion, water quality and quantity, wildlife habitat, wetlands, and forest and grazing lands. Priority is given to areas where State or local governments offer financial, technical, or educational assistance, and to areas where agricultural improvements will help meet water quality objectives. Activities must be carried out according to a conservation plan. The program offers financial, educational, and technical help to install or implement structural, vegetative, and management practices called for in 5- to 10-year contracts. Cost sharing may pay up to 75 percent of the costs of certain conservation practices. Nationally, half of the funding for this program is targeted to livestock-related natural resource concerns and the remainder to other significant conservation priorities.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program provides financial incentives to develop habitat for fish and wildlife on private lands. Participants agree to implement a wildlife habitat development plan, and USDA agrees to provide cost-share assistance for the initial implementation of wildlife habitat development practices. USDA and program participants enter into 5- to 10-year cost-share agreements for wildlife habitat development.

Farmland Protection Program

The Farmland Protection Program provides assistance to State, tribal, or local government entities to help purchase development rights to keep productive farmland in agricultural use. USDA joins with State, tribal, or local governments, working through their existing programs, to acquire conservation easements or other interests from landowners. USDA provides up to 50 percent of the costs of the easements. To qualify, farmland must: be part of a pending offer from a State, tribe, or local farmland protection program; be privately owned; have a conservation plan; be large enough to sustain agricultural production; be accessible to markets for what the land produces; have adequate infrastructure and agricultural support services; and have surrounding parcels of land that can support long-term agricultural production.

Soil Surveys

The year 1999 marked the centennial of the soil survey in the United States — perhaps the largest and most valuable natural resource database in the world. NRCS conducts soil surveys cooperatively with other Federal agencies, land-grant universities, State agencies, and local units of government. Soil surveys provide the public with local information on the uses and capabilities of their soil resource. Soil surveys are based on scientific analysis and classification of the soils, and are used to determine land capabilities and conservation treatment needs. The published soil survey for a county or designated area includes maps and interpretations with explanatory information that is the foundation of resource policy, planning, and decisionmaking for Federal, State, county, and local community programs. Soil survey mapping has been completed on more than 90 percent of the Nation's private land, 48 percent of Indian lands, and 47 percent of public lands. In addition, over 700 soil surveys have been digitized and made available for resource assessments.

Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasts

NRCS field staff collect snow information through a network of about 655 Snow Telemetry (SNOTEL) and 1,100 manual snow courses to provide 13 western States with water supply forecasts. The data are collected, assembled, and analyzed to make about 6,300 annual water supply forecasts, which provide estimates of available annual yield, spring runoff, and summer stream flow. Snowmelt provides approximately 80 percent of the streamflow in the West. Water supply forecasts are used by individuals, organizations, and State and Federal agencies to make decisions relating to agricultural production, fish and wildlife management, flood control, recreation, power generation, and water quality management.

Plant Materials Centers

NRCS employees at 26 Plant Materials Centers assemble, test, and encourage increased plant propagation and usefulness of plant species for biomass production, carbon sequestration, erosion reduction, wetland restoration, water quality improvement, streambank and riparian area protection, coastal dune stabilization, and to meet other special conservation treatment needs. The work is carried out cooperatively with State and Federal agencies, universities, commercial businesses, and seed and nursery associations. After species are proven effective for conservation purposes, they are released to the private sector for commercial production. NRCS has released almost 400 varieties of conservation plants to commercial producers. Nearly 250 improved varieties are now in commerical production and used in conservation programs. Forty-two new plants have been released since 1997.

Small Watersheds Projects

The Small Watershed Program works through local government sponsors and helps participants solve natural resource and related economic problems on a specific watershed. Project purposes include watershed protection, flood prevention, erosion and sediment control, water supply, water quality, fish and wildlife habitat enhancement, wetlands creation and restoration, and public recreation in watersheds of 250,000 or fewer acres. Both technical and financial assistance are available.

Emergency Watershed Protection

The Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program is designed to reduce threats to life and property in the wake of natural disasters. It provides technical and cost-sharing assistance. Assistance includes establishing vegetative cover; installing streambank protection devices; removing debris and sediment; and stabilizing levees, channels, and gullies. In subsequent storms, EWP projects protect homes, businesses, highways, and public facilities from further damage. Floodplain easements under EWP may be purchased to help prevent future losses due to natural disasters.

Watershed Operations

Under the Flood Control Act of 1944, NRCS is authorized to administer watershed works of improvement. Flood prevention operations include planning and installing improvements and land treatment measures for flood prevention; for the conservation, development, utilization, and disposal of water; and for the reduction of sedimentation and erosion damages. This may also include the development of recreational facilities and the improvement of fish and wildlife habitat. Activities are authorized in 11 specific flood prevention projects covering about 35 million acres in 11 States.

Watershed Surveys and Planning

NRCS cooperates with other Federal, State, and local agencies in conducting river basin surveys and investigations, flood hazard analysis, and flood plain management assistance to aid in the development of coordinated water resource programs, including the development of guiding principles and procedures. Cooperative river basin studies are made up of agricultural, rural, and upstream water and land

resources to identify resource problems and determine corrective actions needed. These surveys address a variety of natural resource concerns including water quality improvement, opportunities for water conservation, wetland and water storage capacity, agricultural drought problems, rural development, municipal and industrial water needs, upstream flood damages, and water needs for fish, wildlife, and forest-based industries. Flood plain management assistance includes the identification of flood hazards and the location and use of wetlands. NRCS represents USDA on river basin regional entities and River Basin Interagency Committees for coordination among Federal Departments and States.

Forestry Incentives Program

The Forestry Incentives Program supports good forest management practices on privately owned, nonindustrial forest lands nationwide. The program is designed to benefit the environment while meeting future demands for wood products. Eligible practices are tree planting, timber stand improvement, site preparation for natural regeneration, and related activities. The program is available in counties designated by a Forest Service survey of eligible private timber acreage.

Resource Conservation and Development Program

The Resource Conservation and Development Program (RC&D) provides a framework for local people to join together to improve their community's economy, environment, and living standards. RC&D areas are locally organized, sponsored, and directed. USDA provides technical and financial assistance and helps sponsors secure funding and services from Federal, State, and local sources. The major emphasis is environmental conservation and rural development. Currently, there are 315 RC&D areas covering more than 75 percent of the United States. Each year, these locally organized and directed areas create thousands of new jobs, protect thousands of miles of water bodies, conserve hundreds of thousands of acres of land, and improve the quality of life in hundreds of communities.

RC&D areas are run by a council of volunteers who serve without pay. Currently more than 20,000 people donate 78,000 days per year to improve their communities through this program. USDA provides a person to work full time with each area to help implement local objectives.

Other Activities

National Resources Inventory

Every 5 years, NRCS develops an inventory on the condition and trends of natural resources on non-Federal land. The National Resources Inventory, (NRI) contains the most comprehensive and statistically reliable data of its kind in the world. It measures trends in soil erosion by water and wind, wetland losses, prime farmland acreage, irrigation, habitat and conservation treatment at national, regional, State, and sub-State levels.

Conservation of Private Grazing Land Initiative

The Conservation of Private Grazing Land Initiative will ensure that technical, educational, and related assistance is provided to those who own private grazing lands. The Nation's more than 600 million acres of private grazing lands produce food and fiber, hold and carry important water resources, and offer wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities.

National Conservation Buffer Initiative

In April 1997, Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman announced a new public-private partnership called the National Conservation Buffer Initiative. The goal is to help landowners install 2 million miles of conservation buffers by the year 2002.

Conservation buffers are areas or strips of land maintained in permanent vegetation and designed to intercept pollutants. Buffers can be installed along streams or in uplands—within crop fields, at the edge of crop fields, or outside the margins of a field.

The National Conservation Buffer Initiative is a multi-year effort led by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in cooperation with other USDA agencies, State conservation agencies, conservation districts, agribusinesses, and agricultural and environmental organizations. Seven national agricultural corporations pledged nearly $1 million over 3 years to complement USDA's efforts to promote conservation buffers.

To date, more than 2 million acres—or about 720,000 miles—of buffers have been established under the Conservation Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, and other USDA programs. Agricultural producers and other landowners who install buffers can improve soil, air, and water quality; enhance wildlife habitat; restore biodiversity; and create scenic landscapes.

International Programs

NRCS helps improve the management and conservation of natural resources globally. Participation in collaborative efforts with other countries results in benefits to the United States and in accomplishment of the NRCS mission. During fiscal year 1998, NRCS specialists completed 253 assignments to 49 countries. The objectives of the assignments were to provide short- and long-term technical assistance and leadership for the development of natural resource conservation programs and projects and exchange conservation technology with countries that face soil and water conservation issues similar to those in this country.

NRCS provided opportunities for approximately 205 foreign nationals from more than 25 countries to gain a better understanding of natural resource conservation activities by observing and discussing conservation programs in the United States.

Agricultural Air Quality

The 1996 Farm Bill established a Task Force on Agricultural Air Quality to make recommendations to the Secretary of Agriculture with regard to the scientific basis for agriculture's impact on air quality. The Task Force is charged with strengthening and coordinating USDA air quality research efforts to determine the extent to which agricultural activities contribute to air pollution and to identify cost-effective ways in which the agricultural industry can improve air quality.

Backyard Conservation Campaign

In 1998, NRCS developed a national Backyard Conservation campaign to tell non-farm audiences about the good conservation work being done by America's farmers and ranchers. The campaign features 10 common conservation practices, such as composting, mulching, tree planting, nutrient management, and water conservation, and shows how miniature versions can work in just about any backyard—whether measured in acres, feet, or flower pots.

Farmers and ranchers are already making progress in natural resource conservation by protecting and restoring wetlands, enhancing wildlife habitat, and reducing soil erosion. There are nearly 2 billion acres of land in the United States. Most of that land, 1.4 billion acres, is managed by farmers and ranchers. However, more than 92 million acres are privately developed, and much of this land is tended by homeowners. These homeowners can join the conservation tradition right in their own backyards to curb water pollution and improve wildlife habitat.

For more information on this campaign or agency programs, visit the NRCS web site at *http://www.nrcs.usda.gov*

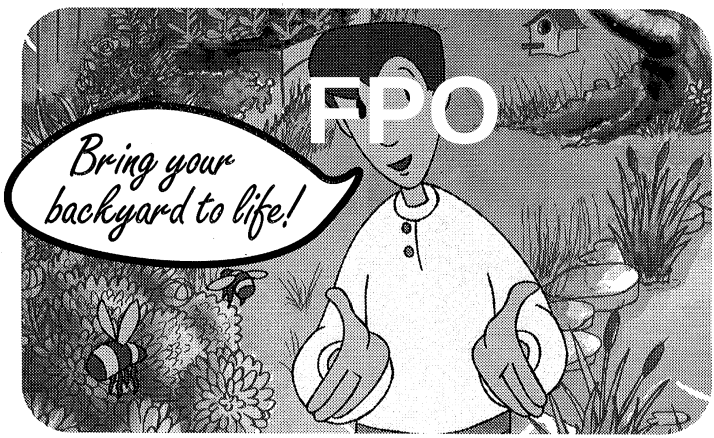
Clean Water Action Plan

USDA worked with State and local governments and other Federal agencies to continue implementation of the President's Clean Water Action Plan. In March 1999, USDA and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency released the United National Strategy for Animal Feeding Operations (AFO's). The strategy established a national performance expectation that all AFO's will develop and be implementing comprehensive nutrient management plans by 2009. This goal will be accomplished primarily through voluntary efforts of AFO owners and operators, with technical and financial assistance from NRCS, other USDA agencies, other Federal agencies, State and local entities, and the private sector.

A series of Federal-tribal regional workshops to assist tribes with their unified watershed assessments and watershed restoration action strategies also took place. In FY 1999, producers completed installation of 6,100 animal waste management systems with NRCS assistance.

BACKYARD CONSERVATION

It'll grow on you.



For years, farmers and ranchers have used conservation practices to save natural resources and improve wildlife habitat. For a free booklet on how you can use some of these same practices in your own backyard – whether you have acres, feet, or a few flower pots –

Call 1-888-LANDCARE

Ask for the Backyard Conservation Booklet.

This is a cooperative project of:
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
National Association of Conservation Districts
Wildlife Habitat Council