

Michael F. Easley, Governor  
William G. Ross Jr., Secretary  
Manly S. Wilder, Director



July 31, 2007

Memorandum

TO: ALL SWCD SUPERVISORS AND STAFF

FROM: David B. Williams, Chief, *DBW*  
NPS Programs Section

RE: Conservation Planning for Agriculture Cost Share Program (ACSP) Contracts

Long before any state or federally funded conservation cost share programs existed, North Carolina's soil and water conservation districts were providing sound conservation planning for the state's agricultural producers and landowners. When cost share programs came into existence, their intent was to assist producers and landowners to implement best management practices specified in conservation plans that contribute to specific resource objectives (e.g., water quality).

The conservation planning process should always at least "identify" all the resource concerns observed on the fields that will be affected by a proposed cost share contract. This is called the resource inventory phase of planning. This holistic planning concept is the foundation for the creation of NRCS and Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and distinguishes NRCS/SWCD services from those of other single resource oriented agencies.

Division, Commission, and NRCS policy have long specified that all federal and state cost-share contracts should be supported by a sound conservation plan that meets the USDA planning policy in the National Planning Procedures Handbook, General Manual, and supplemental state policies. Following this guidance ensures the use of public funds is accomplishing a desired environmental objective, and provides a level of liability protection for the planner and his/her organizations.

Since the specific mandated authority for the ACSP focuses on water quality resource concerns, the conservation plan that supports an ACSP contract should at a minimum include (either as planned practices or as recommended alternatives) all the practices needed to address the water quality concerns on the fields affected by the contract. This does not mean that the plan must cover all land that the cooperating farmer tends or owns. The farmer is not required to implement all the practices recommended nor to implement them all at once. Cooperating farmers/landowners should be encouraged to apply a plan progressively.

Progressive implementation means that a practice standard must be met, and that the participant must install all facilitating or supporting practices that are needed for the system to function properly. For example, a waste storage structure should not be planned without also planning nutrient management/waste utilization as a required practice in the plan.

All practices planned must be designed to meet some NRCS FOTG IV standard (or SWCC adopted standard if applicable). Again, this ensures an environmental objective is met,

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and provides a level of liability protection for the planner and their organizations. For all practices planned, the client must also be provided information on operating and maintaining the practice, as identified in the NRCS FOTG standard.

It is also important to keep in mind that neither NRCS nor SWCD staff are under any obligation to provide cost sharing to a client just because the practice they want is on the cost-list. The practice must be needed to solve an existing resource concern, and it must be the appropriate practice to solve the resource concern. While it is important to take client preferences into consideration during the planning process, the intended purpose of the planned practice(s) must not be compromised. For example, the desire of a client to place a watering facility in a specific location should never override the requirement to place the facility away from surface water and concentrated flow areas.

Attached to this memo is a checklist for districts to consider using to ensure that conservation plans that support ACSP contracts meet the planning policy. **The Division will be using this checklist to spot check cost share files and documentation as part of Program Reviews of each district's implementation of the ACSP beginning with Program Year 2008.** The Division welcomes district feedback on the checklist to make sure that the checklist meets its intended objective without posing an undue burden on district staff.

The Division has consulted with NRCS and wants to ensure that training is not an obstacle to sound conservation planning. Because of the importance of NRCS' Customer Service Toolkit in the planning process for many SWCDs, we would like to make sure that all technical staff that did not receive Toolkit training (and who feel they need the training) have the opportunity to obtain it. The NRCS management Team has also approved a plan to deliver a comprehensive set of GIS training modules for field office Toolkit users. NRCS plans to start offering this training later this year. One of the early modules to be available will be generating Conservation Plan Maps through Toolkit. Other modules currently being designed include making high quality maps, collecting data with GPS and using it in GIS, and using GIS to perform natural resource analysis at the farm, watershed, and county level. We believe this training will be useful to field office staff across all programs. We have also requested NRCS assistance to provide training on progressive conservation planning.

Also, to affirm its support of ensuring sound conservation planning for cost share program implementation, the Commission has approved setting aside a portion of the ACSP Technical Assistance budget to provide a one-time incentive to district employees who become Certified Conservation Planners (CCP) in FY-2007-08. The details have not yet been finalized on how and to whom the incentive will be offered. We will keep you posted as the process is finalized. In the meantime, we encourage district staff to reacquaint themselves with the requirements for becoming a CCP and to begin to integrate CCP requirements into the conservation plans they develop.

Please work through your Area Coordinators to suggest additional training needs that you have to better enable effective conservation planning.

**CC:** Soil and Water Conservation Commission  
Manly Wilder  
Mary K. Combs  
ACSP Staff  
Area Coordinators

## TECHNICAL QUALITY ASSURANCE CHECKLIST FOR CONSERVATION PLANS THAT SUPPORT NCCSP CONTRACTS

Client \_\_\_\_\_ County \_\_\_\_\_

Contract ID \_\_\_\_\_ Contract Program Year \_\_\_\_\_

Items to Review	Yes	No	Comments
1. Was there a water quality or water quantity concern existing on the site prior to the Plan? (e.g. nutrient movement into surface water, erosion, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Were the practices planned or contracted needed and feasible to address the water quality problems?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Was there consideration of potential lower cost treatments that may address the resource concern?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Does the conservation plan contain all the items as applicable on the Conservation Plan Folder Contents list? (on the reverse)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Are there clear assistance notes that describe the client's objectives, and services being provided by the field office?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Is the Plan Map legible and clear?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Does the Resources Inventory identify the resource concerns on the site?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Is the Environmental Compliance form (NC-CPA-52) fully completed and signed to document that we have considered state and federal laws that may affect our plan?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Are the planned practices clearly documented in the Plan narratives to document the client's decisions?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Are alternatives presented to the client (NC-CPA-3) when applicable?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Do the practice designs/job sheets/technical instructions to the client appear to be clear and completed for the site?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Does the Plan include information for the client on how to operate and maintain the practice?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. Did the practices adequately address the water quality concern (e.g. sediment being delivered to the stream) on the site?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Reviewer \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Review \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 1. CONSERVATION PLAN FOLDER CONTENTS**

(✓=Required)

ITEM	Client Copy	Case File
Conservation Plan Map including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Title: “Conservation Plan Map”</li> <li>▪ “Prepared with assistance from (agency)”</li> <li>▪ SWCD name, county, and state</li> <li>▪ Map scale</li> <li>▪ Farm/tract numbers, GPS points, etc.</li> <li>▪ Date prepared</li> <li>▪ North arrow</li> <li>▪ Property and field boundaries</li> <li>▪ Land use and acres for each land unit</li> <li>▪ Appropriate map symbols and legend (Toolkit, National Map Symbol Handbook, NC-CPA-1)</li> </ul>	✓	✓
Conservation Plan Map Legend (may be included as an inset on Plan Map)	✓	✓
Plan Soil Map (with title block) , and Appropriate Soils Interpretations/Information	✓	✓
Resources Inventory & Documentation of Compliance with NEPA, NHCP, and Other Federal/State/Local Requirements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Resource Inventory</li> <li>▪ NC-CPA 52 form</li> </ul>		✓
Forms/Worksheets to Assess Resources/Evaluate Alternatives (as applicable for the resource concerns being evaluated) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ RUSLE Worksheets</li> <li>▪ PLAT/NLEW (NCANAT)</li> </ul>		✓
Planned Practices - Client Decisions/Narratives	✓	✓
List of Alternatives or Additional Practices Needed To Achieve RMS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ NC-CPA-3 form</li> </ul>	✓	✓
Client Objectives and Assistance Notes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ CONS-6 form</li> </ul>		✓
Conservation Plan Signatures of Client and Planner	✓	✓
Designs and Specifications for Planned Practices, Job Sheets, including Operation and Maintenance Requirements.	✓	✓
Documentation of Applied Practices		✓
SWCD Cooperator Agreement and Other Supporting Documentation	Optional	Optional

NCCSP policy, as well as written guidance from the NC Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, the Division of Soil and Water Conservation, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, requires that the programs and services delivered by these organizations be supported by a sound conservation plan that meets NRCS planning policy. For federal and state cost-share programs, it is the intention that a technically sound conservation plan be developed for all the acres under the financial assistance contract (at a minimum), and includes the items listed above as required by NRCS planning guidance.

This form is provided to assist Soil and Water Conservation Districts in their NCCSP Program Reviews. Division staff will spot check contract files as part of each NCCSP Program Review.