Part 600 – National Planning Procedures Handbook

Subpart B – Framework for Planning

600.10 Overview of Conservation Planning

A. This section provides an overview of the process NRCS uses to assist clients (individuals, groups, businesses, and units of government) in developing, implementing, and evaluating conservation plans on agricultural lands, urban areas, or other land uses. The process is used, regardless of the expected outcome, scope, size of the planning area, complexity of natural resource concerns and opportunities, or source of funding to be used for implementation.

B. Conservation planning is a natural resource problem solving and management process. The process integrates economic, social (cultural resource and historic property are included with social), and ecological considerations to meet private and public needs. This approach, which emphasizes desired future conditions, helps improve natural resource management, minimize conflict, and address identified resource concerns and opportunities.

C. The success of conservation planning and implementation depends on the voluntary participation of clients. While participation is voluntary, NRCS personnel must carry out outreach activities to reach underserved customers, such as Tribes, minority producers, and small producers with limited resources, to ensure that services are offered to them on an equal basis with traditional customers. It is imperative that all clients be treated fairly and equitably, and with dignity and respect.

D. The planning process used by NRCS is based on the premise that clients will make and implement sound decisions if they understand their resources, natural resource concerns and opportunities, and the effects of their decisions.

E. Conservation planning helps clients, conservationists, and others view the environment as a living system of which humans are an integral part. Conservation planning enables clients and planners to analyze and work with complex natural processes in definable and measurable terms.

F. The conservation planning process, as described in this handbook, consists of nine steps divided into three phases. It is a process that considers people and the resources they use or manage.

G. Conservation planning is based on a desired future condition that is developed by the client for an individual conservation plan, or by the client and stakeholders, in the case of an areawide conservation plan.

H. Locally led conservation is a process based on the principle that community stakeholders are best suited to identify and resolve local natural resource problems. See Title 440, Conservation Programs Manual, Part 500, for detailed guidance. To provide conservation planning direction and help ensure a balance of natural resource issues with economic and social needs, NRCS employees work with conservation districts to establish objectives that reflect current resource issues and priorities in the district. These objectives will help define a desired future condition for these resources in terms of what the local people want.

I. To supplement data from other agencies or groups, the district and NRCS rely on local knowledge, specific discipline input, and existing public information that relates to the local area. The locally led process utilizes the local work group to meet with stakeholders interested in resource issues. This public information can help identify other resource issues or human considerations that have not previously been a focus of interest in the area.

J. Once these data and objectives are collected and analyzed, alternatives developed and analyzed, and decisions are made, the information may be incorporated into the conservation district's long-range plan or other plan, as appropriate. As areawide conservation plans are developed, and if additional objectives are defined for specific portions of the district, the long-range plan or other plans may be updated.

K. Local objectives are integrated with the FOTG and may form the basis for developing additional technical guidance material. This is accomplished by ensuring that—

(1) New or existing planning criteria support identified objectives.
(2) Guidance documents reflect local resource issues.
(3) Management systems in the FOTG, Section III, serve as examples that work toward accomplishing the identified human considerations for that area.

L. As conservation plans are implemented, progress is made toward accomplishing the agreed-upon desired future state of the resources and the needs of the people. The challenge in conservation planning is to balance the short-term demands for production of goods and services with long-term sustainability of a quality environment.

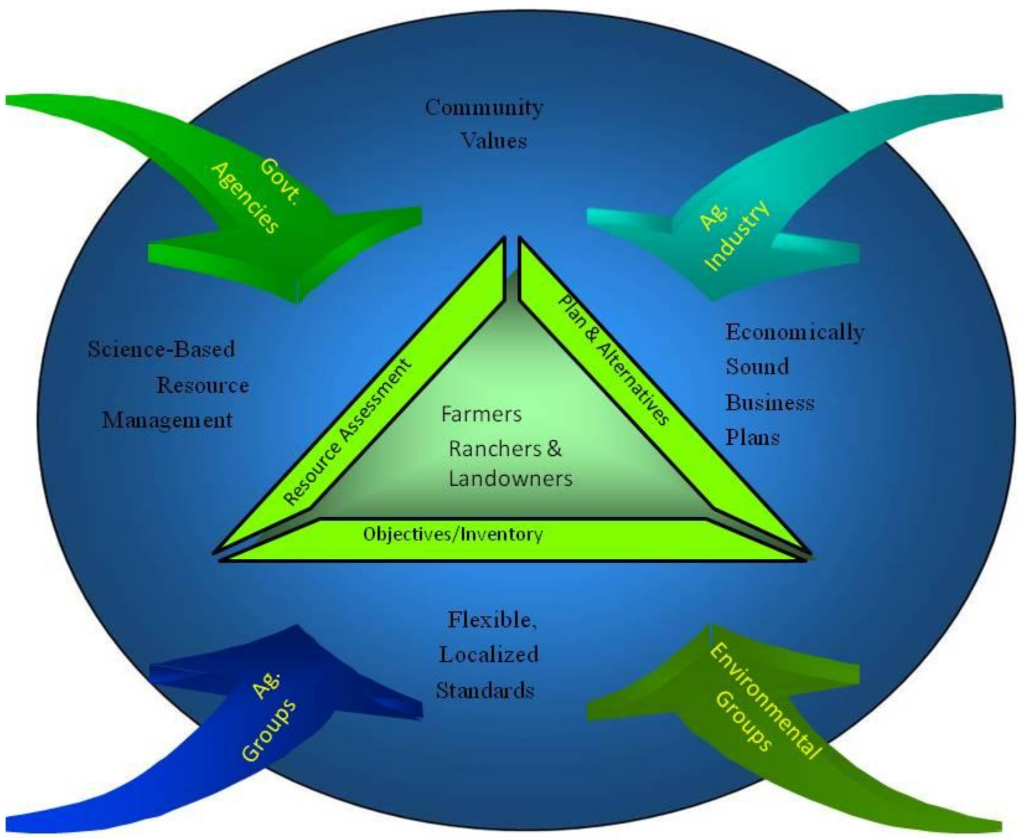

Figure 600-B1: Planning framework diagram

M. Natural resource concerns and opportunities are usually expressed in terms of human values. In achieving a desired natural resource condition, human values determine the scope and extent of problems and the associated corrective actions to be taken.

N. When providing conservation planning assistance, the planner will—

(1) Recognize the interconnections between the planning unit, larger areas outside of or encompassing the planning unit (e.g., watersheds), and smaller areas within the planning unit (e.g., riparian corridors).
(2) Think of the planning area in terms beyond its administrative, jurisdictional, and geographic boundaries.
(3) Consider the short-term, long-term, and cumulative effects of actions.
(4) Mitigate adverse and unintended effects to the maximum extent practicable.
(5) Consider the client’s and society’s economic needs and goals.
(6) Consider all of the client’s enterprises and the interactions between them.
(7) Respect the rights and responsibilities of private land managers.
(8) Facilitate the creation of a desired future condition that meets individual and societal needs.
(9) Recognize that human welfare depends on the sustainability of natural resources.
(10) Base assistance on the best available knowledge, science, and technology (including indigenous stewardship methods).
(11) Incorporate the knowledge gained from previous planning, implementation, and evaluation efforts.
(12) Collaborate with others in collecting, assembling, and evaluating data.
(13) Leverage the resources and expertise of others.
(14) Identify, prevent, and mitigate, to the greatest extent practicable, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of planning assistance on minority and low-income populations.
(15) Comply with all applicable Federal, State, Tribal, and local laws, regulations, and policies.

O. In summary, conservation planning deals with complete systems, rather than just parts of systems. The expected physical effects of conservation systems and practices are assessed in the context of ecological, economic, and social considerations as documented locally in the FOTG. The expected outcomes of those effects on natural resource quality, economic needs, and social objectives are then used to help develop and evaluate management alternatives.

600.11 The Planning Process

A. Planning areas generally exist in a hierarchy. Each planning unit is contained within a larger planning unit. An areawide conservation plan may be developed for a watershed, a watershed contains individual farms and ranches, individual farms and ranches contain land units. Planning at each level is completed in appropriate degrees of detail, taking into account the objectives of those associated larger and smaller planning areas.

B. The planning process provides the framework for developing a conservation plan on the basis of client objectives, as well as ecological, economic, social, legal, and policy considerations. Technical, educational, and financial assistance programs from NRCS or other sources are used to implement the plans.

C. The same planning process is used to develop conservation plans and areawide conservation plans, but different activities are required to complete each step of the process. Guidance in this handbook is separated accordingly into conservation planning and areawide conservation planning.

D. Onsite visits with the client are an integral part of the planning process.

E. In most instances, conservation plans are developed with an individual decisionmaker. An areawide conservation plan reflects the desired future conditions developed in conjunction with the client and other stakeholders in the area. The stakeholders may be decisionmakers for implementing planned activities, but probably are not.

F. The planning process used by NRCS is a three-phase, nine-step process. Although the nine steps are shown in sequence, the process is very dynamic. The process could start with any of the first three steps or even step nine. Cycling back to previous steps is often necessary. For example, step one and two may not be finalized until step four is completed. Also some planning activities may overlap planning steps, and some activities may not necessarily occur in a particular planning step each time.

(1) Phase I – Collection and Analysis (Understanding the Problems and Opportunities)
   (i) Step 1 – Identify problems and opportunities
   (ii) Step 2 – Determine objectives
   (iii) Step 3 – Inventory resources
   (iv) Step 4 – Analyze resource data
(2) Phase II – Decision Support (Understanding the Solutions)
   (i) Step 5 – Formulate alternatives
   (ii) Step 6 – Evaluate alternatives
   (iii) Step 7 – Make decisions
(3) Phase III – Application and Evaluation (Understanding the Results)
   (i) Step 8 – Implement the plan
   (ii) Step 9 – Evaluate the plan

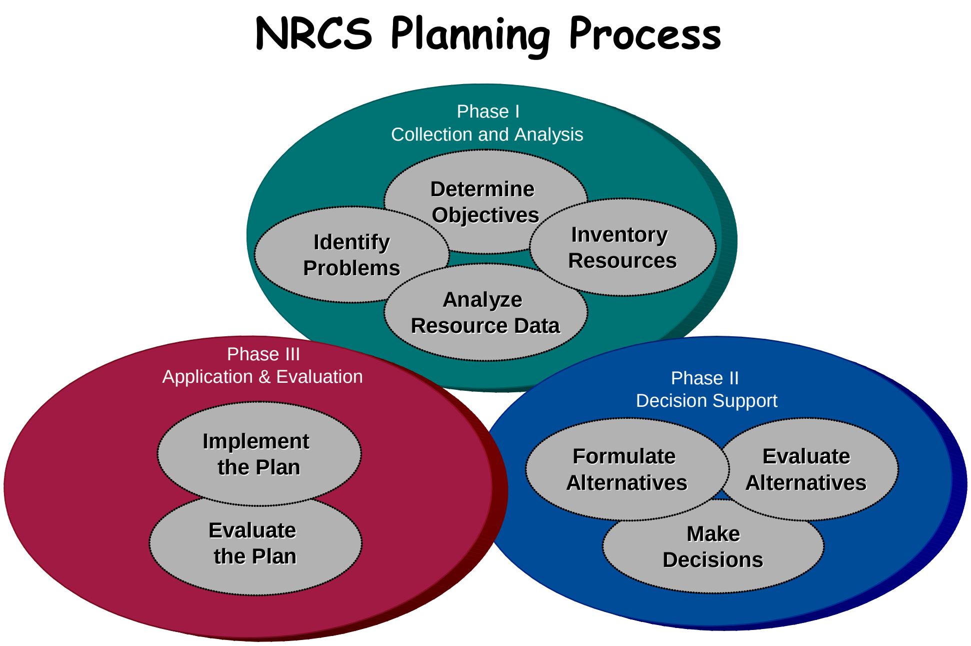

Figure 600-B2: An illustration of the dynamic nature of the planning process

600.12 Concepts in Conservation Planning

A. Conservation planning helps identify and address resource concerns. Whether through screening, assessment, or by client and planner identification, addressing resource concerns is a dynamic and adaptive process. Technology improvements, on-farm management changes, and new resource considerations come into play, while others may no longer be relevant. Clearly presenting alternative solutions is critical to assisting land users when making key decisions on the land. Conservation planning and additional support concepts and strategies are presented here.

B. This guidance includes identifying and assessing resource concerns as part of the planning process. Technical assistance is key to identifying and assessing benchmark conditions, resource concerns, and effects of the current conditions; and developing, evaluating, and selecting an alternative solution to the concerns. Financial assistance conservation programs exist, such as those contained within the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended, that may define more specific levels of planning for specific resource issues.

(1) Conservation Plans

(i) Individual-Level Plans.—These plans are voluntary, site-specific, comprehensive, and action-oriented. A conservation plan is developed for one or more planning land units and documents the land manager’s selected alternative. The plan contains natural resource information, supporting documents, and a record of decisions made by the client. It describes the schedule of operations and activities needed to solve identified natural resource concerns while taking advantage of opportunities to enhance resources.

- Using the planning process to develop the conservation plan helps ensure the needs of the client and the resources are achieved and that Federal, State, Tribal, territorial, and local requirements are met. Conservation planning is flexible and plans may include all contiguous and noncontiguous land that is a part of the client’s enterprise, including owned and rented land, or may include only a portion of the enterprise.
- Conservation plans may include component plans to address one or more resource concerns. Examples include comprehensive nutrient management plans, grazing plans, integrated pest management pans, and irrigation water management plans etc. See subpart G for additional guidance.
- When two or more decisionmakers need assistance on planning, installing, and maintaining a conservation system that may cross land unit boundaries, the planner may utilize a group planning process. For example, solving problems associated with a stream that flows through several properties requires the coordinated, cooperative efforts of all of the individuals involved. The group may serve as the decisionmaker. However, a conservation plan is developed for each of the land units involved in of this type of group planning effort. Group plans are generally owned or directly controlled by the individuals involved.

(ii) Comprehensive Plans With Units of Government.—A comprehensive plan is developed for an area under the jurisdiction of a unit of government that may include, but is not limited to, policies, goals, and interrelated plans for private and public land use, transportation systems, community facilities, and capital improvements. The plan represents the decisions of local people as expressed through units of government. This type of plan also may be called a general plan, master plan, community plan, or a regional development plan. NRCS may serve as a technical advisor for the development of these types of plans. NRCS primarily provides natural resource information and related technical data to the unit of government, or to a professional planner, who may use their own planning process.

(iii) Areawide Plans.—Areawide conservation plans are voluntary, comprehensive plans for a watershed or other large geographic area. Areawide conservation planning will consider all natural resources within the planning area, as well as social and economic considerations. Plan development follows the established planning process to assist local people, through a voluntary locally led effort, to assess their natural resource conditions and needs; set goals; identify programs, alternative actions, and other resources to solve those needs; develop proposals and recommendations to address those needs; implement solutions; and measure their success. A locally led effort considers all pertinent Federal, State, Tribal, territorial, and local conservation programs and private sector programs, singly and in combination, as tools to solve natural resource concerns.

C. Resource Concerns

(1) Natural Resource Concerns.—Identified natural resource concerns and opportunities are discussed during the planning process. Resource concerns may be identified by the client through the resource inventory process and by screening and assessment of individual concerns. The NRCS objective in conservation planning is to help the client manage resources for sustained use and productivity while considering economic and social needs.

Figure 600-B3: Soil erosion – water: sheet, rill and gully

Figure 600-B4: Soil erosion – wind

Figure 600-B5: Soil erosion – excessive bank erosion from stream, shorelines or water conveyance

Figure 600-B6: Soil quality degradation - compaction

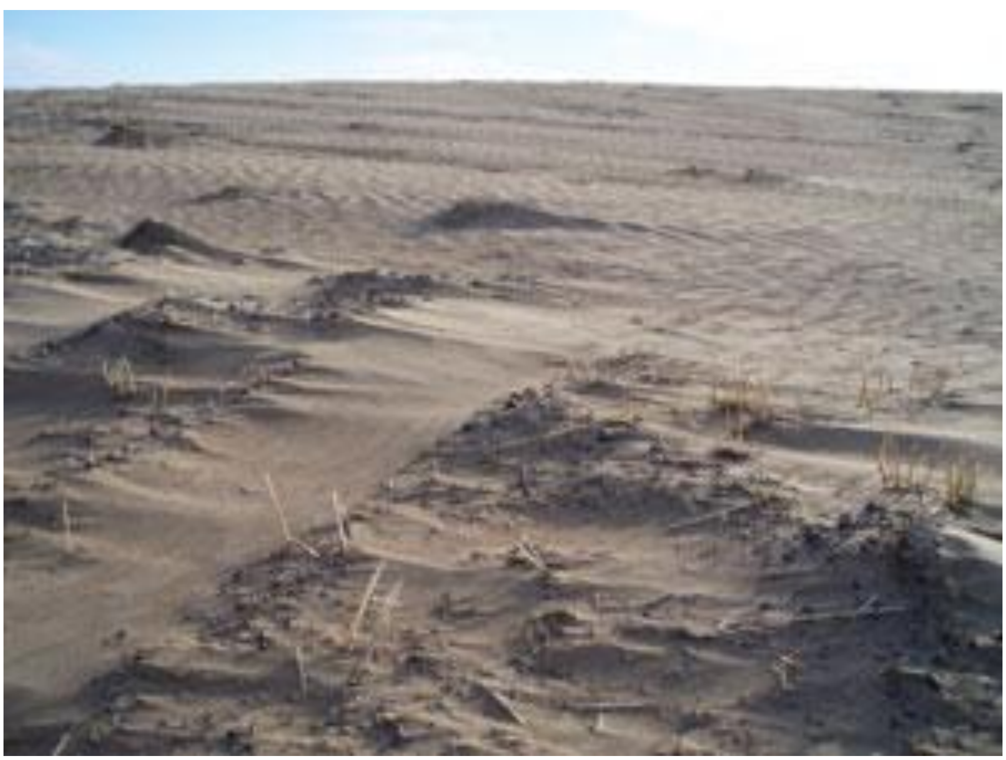

Figure 600-B7: Soil quality degradation – Organic Matter Depletion

Figure 600-B8: Soil quality degradation – Concentration of salts or other chemicals

Figure 600-B9: Degraded plant condition – undesirable plan productivity

Figure 600-B10: Degraded plant condition – wildfire excessive biomass accumulation

Figure 600-B11: Inadequate habitat for fish and wildlife – habitat degradation

Figure 600-B12: Water quantity – Insufficient moisture management

Figure 600-B13: Water quality degradation – excessive nutrients in surface waters

(2) Social and Economic Resource Considerations and Concerns.—One of the keys to successful conservation planning and implementation is understanding the behavior and way of life of clients and stakeholders. The term "human considerations" refers to the social and economic considerations that are addressed in the planning process. Cultural resources and historic properties are included in this concept. Human considerations will be considered early in the planning process since they can help guide the planner in providing the information the client needs to make informed decisions. Economic and social issues are important in formulating resource management systems since they are closely linked to human behavior. For a more complete discussion of economic and social topics, and their relationship to client behavior, see Subpart D, Section 600.42, "Working With Individuals and Groups."

(i) Social considerations include public health and safety, as well as social, family, ethic, ethnic, spiritual, and religious values. They also include societal goals, client characteristics, risk tolerance or aversion, tenure or time availability, and the presence of cultural resources and historic properties.

(ii) Differing social, ethnic, or religious backgrounds may also effect the adoption of conservation practices. Such differences must be recognized and accounted for early in the planning process. Some groups may have land-use ethics or social customs that conflict with some NRCS conservation practices.

(iii) Economic considerations in planning are closely linked to individual or group behavior. In most cases, planning will include economic goals, such as preserving income, minimizing costs, or reducing risk. By understanding the economic goals of decisionmakers, planners can identify barriers to, and opportunities associated with, adopting conservation. Onsite economic considerations may include operational income and expenses, conservation system costs, credit availability, yield effects, or base acreage effects. When considering changing inputs and outputs of an operation, assessing the overall return on investment will highlight the effects of each change. For example no-till may result in a yield reduction, but due to fewer trips across a field, increased organic matter levels etc., there may be an overall economic savings, producing a higher return on their investment. On a larger scale, economic considerations could include water supply costs, flood damage reduction, recreation enhancement, or regional effects, such as job creation or changes in tax revenue.

(iv) Social and economic considerations can be evaluated by referring to information in the FOTG, Section I (costs), Section III, and Section V (effects information and case studies); reviewing census data; consulting with farm managers, advisors, and other agency experts; modeling; and by experience. Cultural resource and historic property can be located and assessed with the help of cultural resource coordinators or specialists.

(v) Planners must take steps to ensure that outreach activities are conducted to identify and reach underserved customers, such as Tribes, minority producers, and small producers with limited resources. Planners must also be aware that traditional outreach activities often do not reach the underserved customer. There are a host of personal, social, cultural, and economic barriers that serve as deterrents to underserved customers coming forward and asking for technical assistance for conservation planning and implementation.

(vi) Several outreach methods, such as on-farm demonstrations, education meetings, increased cost-share rates, one-on-one assistance, involving local leaders, and making technical assistance available may help to successfully address some of the barriers faced by underserved customers.

(3) Legal and Statutory Requirements

(i) Confidentiality and Privacy.—Client records are confidential, except for those that are subject to the Freedom of Information Act. NRCS policy on the Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act are contained in National Instruction 120-310 and Title 120, GM, Part 408. No one outside of NRCS, except those specifically authorized by NRCS, such as certain conservation district employees, is permitted access to client data. The conservation plan is a confidential document, and no person or agency other than NRCS may access it without written authorization by the client. The conservation plan does not provide public access to the property.

(ii) Personally Identifiable Information (PII).—USDA holds a vast amount of data on its employees and clients. Some of these data are readily available to the public and, in fact, is mandated to be made available through various legislative and legal vehicles. However, some data are sensitive and may never be made public, such as personally identifiable information.

- PII refers to information that can be used to distinguish or trace an individual's identity. PII can include information or combinations of information, such as Social Security numbers (in complete or truncated form), place of birth, date of birth, mother's maiden name, biometric record, fingerprint, iris scan, DNA, medical history, medical conditions, financial information, credit card numbers, bank account numbers, etc.
- USDA is committed to protecting PII for both employees and clients. USDA has a toll-free PII Incident Hotline at 1 (877) PII-2YOU. The hotline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. There is also an Incident Hotline at 1 (888) 926-2373.

(iii) NEPA and Other Environmental Requirements.—Title 190, National Environmental Compliance Handbook, Part 610, contains detailed information on complying with NEPA. All NRCS planning activities will be conducted in compliance with NEPA and other applicable requirements for the protection of the environment. Subpart D, section 600.41, provides recommended sources for additional planning process support guidance to assist planners in incorporating NEPA and other requirements into the planning process.

600.13 Planning Directives

A. Direction for applying the planning process is derived from five major sources.

(1) Policy.—NRCS conservation planning policy is detailed in the 180-GM, Part 409, "Conservation Planning Policy." 450-GM, Part 401, "Technical Guides," describes NRCS policy for development of technical guides in support of the planning policy. NRCS policy for compliance with NEPA is located in the 190-GM, Part 410, "Compliance With NEPA."

(2) Procedures.—Title 180, National Planning Procedures Handbook, Part 600, supports the planning policy by describing the planning process and the how-to guidance used by NRCS to carry out that process. Title 190, National Environmental Compliance Handbook, Part 610, provides guidance on integrating the requirements of NEPA and other special environmental concerns into the planning process.

(3) Technical Guidance.—The FOTGs are the primary technical reference for NRCS and are localized to apply specifically to an identified geographic area. The FOTG contains five sections supporting the technical aspects of conservation planning activities as identified below (see 450-GM, Part 401, Sections 401.3 to 401.7, for content of FOTG):

(i) I – General Resource References
(ii) II – Natural Resources Information
(iii) III – Resource Management Systems and Planning Criteria
(iv) IV – Practice Standards and Specifications
(v) V – Conservation Effects

(4) Tools.—User guides for specific tools contain information for use and maintenance of conservation planning tools.

(5) Program Guidance.—Manuals contain policy and guidance for administering programs that can facilitate implementation of planned measures.

600.14 Preplanning Activities

A. This handbook describes the planning process in detail and provides guidance on carrying out each planning step. However, the process itself is preceded by preplanning activities, which can play a critical role in the outcome and effectiveness of plan development.

Figure 600-B14: Conservationist and client reviewing conservation plan information in a field office

B. Preplanning activities set the stage for conservation planning with the client by ensuring that basic information is obtained from the client and that background information, necessary to initiate the planning process, is assembled.

C. The activities leading up to planning normally begin in one of three ways:

(1) The potential client may contact the conservation district or NRCS to seek assistance in solving identified natural resource concerns or opportunities.
(2) NRCS, conservation district, or partner personnel may contact a potential client for the purpose of initiating planning activities.
(3) Proactive citizens may contact partners, the conservation district, or NRCS for planning assistance to prevent potential problems from occurring or to take advantage of opportunities.

D. Regardless of how the client and the planner are brought together, several items can be addressed before planning activities begin. Preplanning activities—

(1) Identify the principal client or clients that will participate in the planning process and their respective roles. Update client information. Determine who has decisionmaking authority for the planning area.

(2) Describe to the client in general terms the planning process and the expected benefits of having a conservation plan.
(3) Explain to the client the roles and responsibilities of the client and NRCS.
(4) Explain the role of the conservation district and the relationship the district program has in making technical assistance available to land users.
(5) Define the planning area on a map and geospatial layers.
(6) Assemble all needed information and data for use in planning. The FOTG is a principal source of reference material pertinent to the field office.
(7) Identify other sources of information or technical assistance that may be available from other agencies, organizations, etc.
(8) Identify tools and supplies that will be needed in the field and have them available for the first field visit.
(9) As necessary, perform some reconnaissance and collect some basic data before the initial planning session is held.
(10) Schedule an initial planning session with the client.