Chapter 1 NRCS Authority, Mission, Goal, and Policies for Private Grazing Lands Assistance

Contents:

600.0100	**Authority**	**1–1**
600.0101	**Mission**	**1–1**
600.0102	**Goal**	**1–2**
600.0103	**Policies**	**1–2**
	(a) State supplements	1–2
	(b) Technical guides	1–2
	(c) Interdisciplinary action	1–3
	(d) Soil surveys	1–3
	(e) Plants	1–3
	(f) Technical assistance	1–3
	(g) Grazing lands applications	1–4
	(h) Prescribed burning	1–4
	(i) Riparian area recognition and management	1–4
	(j) Resource interpretations	1–5
	(k) Relations	1–5

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600.0100 Authority

The Soil Conservation Act of 1935 provides the basic authority for programs of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), formerly the Soil Conservation Service (SCS). This act declares that it is the policy of Congress to control and prevent soil erosion and thereby preserve the natural resources on farm, grazing, and forest lands of the Nation. It authorizes the Natural Resource Conservation Service to carry out conservation measures on the land and to assist land users in conducting conservation activities (Public Law 46, 74th Congress).

NRCS responsibility and programs were broadened by the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act, Public Law 566, 1954, as amended, and the Food and Agricultural Act of 1962, Public Law 87-703, as amended. The 1996 Farm Bill authorizes a Conservation for Private Grazing Lands technical assistance program (Title III, H.R. 2854 Section 386).

NRCS has specific responsibility to assist owners and operators of grazing lands in planning and applying conservation programs on the privately controlled land in their operating units (Amendment No. 4, Title 9, Administrative Regulations, May 17, 1954, and Comptroller General's Opinion B-115665 of October 1, 1953, 33CG:133).

600.0101 Mission

To provide quality assistance to the owners and managers of rangeland, pastureland and other grazed lands using appropriate science and technology to manage, enhance, and, where necessary, restore these grazing land ecosystems.

600.0102 Goal

The goal of NRCS grazing lands activities is to provide for the management, enhancement, and, where necessary, the restoration of privately owned grazing lands throughout the United States through a voluntary technical assistance program that results in multiple environmental, social, and economic benefits.

The broad public benefits that will result from well managed grazing lands include:

- Protection of grazing lands ecosystems
- Prevention of soil erosion
- Maintenance or enhancement of soil quality
- Sustained forage and livestock production
- Improved water yield and quality
- Diverse wildlife habitat
- Aesthetics and open space
- Quality recreational opportunities

600.0103 Policies

NRCS policy is to maintain high standards of technical quality in all activities related to grazing lands. This handbook contains general NRCS policy for grazing lands, background information, and how-to information for applying this policy. In addition, the NRCS policy specific to grazing lands that is in the General Manual and other policy documents is summarized below.

(a) State supplements

State conservationists and their grazing lands specialists may supplement this handbook. Supplements should be used to further explain NRCS policy, provide additional details for technical procedures described in this handbook, or to provide additional guidance in planning and applying conservation practices on grazing lands. Copies of state-level supplements should be sent to the NRCS national program leader for range and pasture and to the director of the NRCS Grazing Lands Technology Institute.

(b) Technical guides

State conservationists, assisted by grazing land specialists and other NRCS personnel, prepare and keep current technical guides for grazing lands. These guides contain standards needed to:

- Evaluate the potential of rangeland, grazed forest land, and native and naturalized pasture by identifying and describing ecological sites and other interpretive groupings.
- Determine the similarity index of rangeland in relation to its potential and to assess the forage value rating on all grazing lands.
- Identify stable and sustainable ecological states for rangeland that provide identified and desired benefits, and describe appropriate management inputs to achieve them.
- Develop sound specifications for conservation practices for all grazing lands.

- Help landowners and managers select and apply the conservation practices needed to improve and conserve the soil, water, air, plant, and animal resources of their land for all acceptable uses.
- Assist landowners to develop Resource Management Systems (RMS) that meet locally established quality criteria for their resources that prevent degradation and permit sustainable use.

(c) Interdisciplinary action

Line officers, rangeland management specialists, pasture management specialists, agronomists, biologists, foresters, soil scientists, hydrologists, animal scientists, economists, and other specialists work together to provide coordinated guidelines for use and management of grazing lands. Most land has the potential for more than one use, which is best recognized and provided for through multidisciplinary action.

(d) Soil surveys

The *National Soil Survey Handbook* provides policy and procedures for making soil surveys on grazing lands, making interpretations from soil surveys for potential native plant communities, and publishing soil surveys.

The *National Planning Procedures Handbook* outlines procedures for using information about soils in resource conservation planning.

(e) Plants

NRCS policy states that communications about, reference to, and the collection of data about plant species be based upon the information maintained in the National PLANTS information system. The NRCS standard for plant species names, symbols, and basic attributes is maintained in PLANTS, which can be accessed though FOCS PLANTS and the Internet (http://plants.usda.gov).

(f) Technical assistance

Technical assistance to land users is to be provided according to the provisions in the *National Planning Procedures Handbook* (NPPH). The NPPH gives guidance to NRCS planners for providing alternatives and assistance to address all resources during the conservation planning process on all land units.

(1) Assistance to users

To achieve the conservation objectives for individual operating units, NRCS assists users of grazing lands in developing and implementing their conservation plans on the basis of a scientific inventory of soil, water, plant, animal, and wildlife habitat resources. The objective is to help all users of grazing lands become conservationists. Group planning and application assistance, as well as assistance to communities and units of government, are provided as appropriate to supplement work with individual users of grazing lands.

(2) Guidance on stocking rates

NRCS is responsible for:

- Providing cooperators with information on initial stocking rates applicable to different kinds of grazing lands and the current status of the plant cover.
- Explaining to cooperators how to use this information to initiate sound grazing management.
- Encouraging cooperators to plan long-term operations based on proper use of forage and to make timely adjustments in grazing use to ensure efficient harvest while maintaining or improving the plant community.

(3) Followup assistance

Followup assistance is needed to ensure progress in implementing conservation plans, especially those relating to grazing management practices. District conservationists assure that enough time is scheduled to provide cooperators adequate assistance in applying planned conservation practices and in keeping their conservation plans current.

(4) Assistance on federally administered public land

Under specific circumstances NRCS furnishes technical assistance on public land under Federal management. Such assistance is provided through respective soil and water conservation districts in accordance with agreements with all agencies concerned.

(i) Developing and revising ecological site descriptions on lands administered by BLM and BIA—The NRCS, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) each have statutory authority and responsibilities for rangeland and forest land inventory, appraisal, and monitoring. Accurate ecological site descriptions are necessary to carry out those responsibilities. NRCS policy is to cooperate with the BLM and BIA in the development and refinement of ecological site descriptions.

Local NRCS, BIA, and BLM employees jointly determine when new or revised sites are necessary. When a revision is needed, the NRCS district conservationist in concert with appropriate BLM or BIA program managers establishes an interagency team that includes essential resource specialists.

Drafts of revised or new site descriptions are sent to the appropriate BLM, BIA, and NRCS state offices. The NRCS state conservationist is responsible for sending the draft site descriptions to the appropriate BLM or BIA office along with a copy of all correspondence pertaining to the site description. New site descriptions are field tested for at least 1 year prior to final adoption or approval by NRCS. During this time field offices may proceed with mapping of the site, being careful to maintain identity of the site in question so that the soils can be correctly assigned at a later date.

When revising draft site descriptions, field office or area office personnel must remember the need for interstate and intrastate correlations. Consultation with the Forest Service, Extension Service, and academia may also be advisable.

BIA and BLM field office employees may draft proposed revisions or new site descriptions based on preliminary, informal discussions with their counterparts in NRCS when they need revisions or new site descriptions and NRCS is unable to provide assistance because of budgetary or staffing constraints. These draft descriptions are sent to the appropriate NRCS office(s) for concurrence and processing.

(5) Project plans and environmental assessments

Line officers schedule grazing land specialists to work with project leaders to provide grazing land resource information and interpretations for inclusion in work plans along with other resource information. Appropriate procedures are described in the *National Planning Procedures Handbook* and *National Watersheds Manual*. If procedures are developed on an interagency basis, NRCS procedures and standards are to be clearly presented to participating-agency representatives and used to the fullest extent practicable.

(g) Grazing lands applications

The Grazing Lands Applications (GLA) planning software is a decision-support system planning tool that can be used in the NRCS planning process on all grazing lands. NRCS employees may begin using GLA for all planning and application activities on grazing lands upon receipt of formal training. Professional judgment and experience are used to determine if computerized assistance is needed and whether additional or alternative tools are appropriate.

(h) Prescribed burning

NRCS supports and encourages prescribed burning on rangeland, pastureland, forest land, hayland, Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) land, and wildlife land to meet specific resource management objectives. The NRCS policy on prescribed burning on grazing lands is in appendix A of this handbook. The national standard for prescribed burning is in the *National Handbook of Conservation Practices*.

(i) Riparian area recognition and management

Riparian areas are natural ecosystems that occur along watercourses or waterbodies. They are distinctly different from the surrounding lands because of unique soil and vegetation characteristics, which are strongly influenced by free or unbound water in the soil. Riparian areas are not a separate land use, but exist within all land types and uses. Complete NRCS policy on riparian areas is in General Manual, 190-ECS, Issue-8, Part 411.

(j) Resource interpretations

Ecological sites are the interpretive units for native grazing lands. Primary productivity in kinds, proportions, and amounts (air-dry weight) of plants is the major criterion for identifying and describing these sites. For pasture, hayland, and grazed cropland, the potential to produce vegetation can be interpreted through suitability groups or on appropriate grouping of soils.

(k) Relations

(1) General

Under the guidance of line officers, grazing land specialists establish and maintain effective working relationships with agencies, organizations, and institutions and help them to understand NRCS objectives and procedures. Needed agreements or commitments are made by line officers responsible for the work. Effective relationships with academic departments; producer, conservation, and environmental organizations; personnel in other agencies; and soil and water or resource conservation districts are important in furthering NRCS programs dealing with grazing lands.

(2) Relationship of NRCS and grazing land consultants

Consultants in grazing land management provide expertise and services for a fee to grazing land owners and cooperators. Consultants, among other things, increase the awareness and interest of livestock operators in grazing management and grazing systems. This increased interest has, in many locations, created additional demands for NRCS technical assistance.

Field offices provide a list of available consultants upon request to conservation district cooperators and other clientele. NRCS does not endorse or exclusively recommend any one vendor, contractor, consultant, grazing system or method, service offered by a consultant, or trade name product. It is important that NRCS personnel avoid preferential treatment or the appearance of it.

Some consultants offer range management training. NRCS employees may participate in this nongovernment training, within budgetary constraints, when it satisfies a training need and is advantageous to the Service.