Part 530 – Working Lands Conservation Programs Manual

Subpart J – Program Evaluation

530.90 Purpose

A. This subpart outlines agency requirements for the continuous improvement of conservation programs and program delivery, using data and feedback mechanisms from employees and stakeholders.

530.91 References

A. Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRMA)

B. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular No. A-11, "Preparation, Submission and Execution of the Budget," July 2020

C. The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act (Evidence Act)

D. Program Management Improvement Accountability Act of 2016 (PMIAA)

E. Title 440, Conservation Program Manual (CPM), Part 500, "Locally Led Conservation" (440-CPM-500)

F. Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) Learning Agenda for Evidence Act Implementation Policy Guidance

530.92 Definitions

A. Refer to OMB Circular A-11, Section 200 for definitions of the following terms related to preparing, submitting, and executing the budget:

(1) Actionable information data of significant value,
(3) Evaluation,
(4) Program, and
(5) Program activity.

B. Program Monitoring.—The active and periodic review and analysis of program performance data for continuous improvement of program efficiency and effectiveness.

C. Program Portfolio Reviews (in accordance with PMIAA).—Reviews of programs conducted in coordination with USDA's strategic reviews.

D. Program Reporting.—The provision of program performance and evaluation data for the purposes of monitoring, evaluating, or providing evidence on program results.

530.93 Background

(1) The GPRMA requires that agency managers routinely use evidence and actionable data to make decisions to improve agency results and efficiencies.
(2) The Evidence Act and related OMB guidance on evidence and evaluation requires NRCS and other Federal agencies to use evidence-based policy making to improve agency policy, program, budget, operational, and management decision-making.

(3) The PMIAA aims to improve program management and accountability as part of the broader Federal performance framework.
(4) Timely monitoring of program performance and taking corrective actions maintains a focus on the priorities and ensures objectives are accomplished efficiently and effectively.
(5) External audiences for program reporting include the USDA, Performance Improvement Council, Program Management Improvement Council, OMB, Congress, and the public.
(6) Internal program monitoring and reporting for agency managers includes more detailed reports, scorecards, and dashboards to be used for decision-making and improving results and efficiency.
(7) Frequent monitoring and reporting of an agency's actionable data necessitates the use of agency-wide business tools for capturing and reporting program data.

530.94 Responsibilities

A. The Chief ensures agency compliance with program monitoring and reporting aspects of the GPRMA.

B. The Associate Chief monitors program performance for deputy chiefs and ensures the use of evidence in decision-making and program evaluation.

C. Deputy chiefs monitor program performance within their deputy area and oversee the use of evidence in decision making and program evaluation.

D. The Deputy Chief for Programs

(1) Develops agency policy for program evaluations and reporting.
(2) Develops agency strategy for the use of evidence and evaluation for program continuous improvement.
(3) Assures timely, actionable program information is available to other deputy chiefs and the regional conservationists.
(4) Provides program reports to track agency results.
(5) Monitors program efficiency and effectiveness and reports accomplishments to the NRCS Chief.
(6) Assigns data owners and data stewards for program data.

E. Regional Conservationists

(1) Monitor program performance in their regions and take corrective actions as needed.
(2) Verify the use of evidence in program evaluation and reporting.
(3) Ensure that State conservationists conduct frequent data-driven reviews that guide decisions and actions to improve program outcomes, manage risk, and reduce costs.

F. State Conservationists

(1) Oversee the monitoring and reporting of programs within the State.
(2) Conduct frequent data-driven reviews that guide decisions and actions to improve program outcomes, manage risk, and reduce costs.
(3) Ensure that evidence is used in program evaluations and reporting within the State.
(4) Assigns State data owners and data stewards for State program data.

G. Designated Conservationists

(1) Monitor programs within the service area and take action as necessary.
(2) Ensure the quality of the data within their service area and certify it as complete and accurate.
(3) Provide input to State managers during program evaluations and monitoring for continuous improvement. Input may also be derived from—

(i) Feedback during local working group meetings, or other partnership events, or directly received from customers.
(ii) Issues discovered during annual contract status reviews.

530.95 Policy

A. Programs, as defined above, must have defined critical success factors with program evaluation metrics defined, documented, and provided to decision makers with data visualization tools.

B. NRCS must monitor programs at an appropriate frequency with data, measures, and indicators that comply with Title 340, General Manual (GM), Part 403, "Performance Measurement" (340-GM-403).

C. Program data and metrics must have identified data stewards and data owners.

D. When metrics indicate NRCS needs to make improvements in program delivery (efficiency and effectiveness), the agency must use continuous process improvement (CPI) standard practices to ensure customer input and data-driven decisions.

E. Program reports must be—

(1) Consistent and reliable so that agency managers can develop and carry out plans for improvement.
(2) Transparent and repeatable, including documentation required by 340-GM-403, Subpart B, "Development of Performance Measures."
(3) Limited to a small set (<10) of measures of significant value for focusing priorities.

F. NRCS must use standardized methods and business tools for program monitoring and reporting.