

Part 409 – Conservation Planning Policy

409.0 General

- A. This document establishes NRCS policy for providing conservation planning assistance to clients. The director of the Conservation Planning and Technical Assistance Division (CPTAD) has national responsibility for conservation planning policy.
- B. States may supplement this policy, as needed, to provide specific guidance and to comply with State, territorial, Tribal, and local laws and regulations. State supplements must fit within the scope of this policy. A copy of the State supplement must be sent to the Director, CPTAD, for review and approval.
- C. Title 180, National Planning Procedures Handbook, Part 600 (180-NPPH-600), provides procedures and guidance on implementing the NRCS conservation planning process.
- D. In cases where NRCS is assisting, or is assisted by, other agencies, Tribes, or groups, NRCS planning procedures and plan format may be modified to meet those specific client needs, provided that all applicable Federal environmental and compliance requirements are met.
- E. All references within this policy to State conservationists include the directors of the Pacific Islands and Caribbean Areas.

409.1 Conservation Planning Overview

- A. Conservation plans are the basis for all assistance NRCS provides to clients and the basic tool for clients to manage their natural resources. Client participation in all steps of the planning process is encouraged to bring the most value to the process.
- B. The objective in conservation planning is to help each client attain sustainable use and sound management of soil, water, air, plant, animal, and energy resources, based on related human considerations. The purpose is to prevent the degradation of resources and to ensure their sustained use and productivity, while considering the client's economic and social needs. Conservation planning assistance is based on ecological, economic, and social considerations relative to the resources.
 - (1) Conservation planning is conducted with the client, working progressively towards a resource management system (RMS) level of management. An RMS is a combination of conservation practices and resource management activities that treats all identified resource concerns for soil, water, air, plants, animals, and energy, to a level that meets or exceeds the planning criteria in the FOTG.
 - (2) The conservation planning process is considered progressive when a conservation plan addresses only a limited number of resource concerns—or even a single resource concern—and consequently does not achieve an RMS level of treatment. The rate of progress in moving to an RMS level plan will depend on the client's desires and constraints.
 - (3) A conservation plan is developed for one or more planning land units and documents the client's selected alternative.
 - (4) When NRCS provides conservation planning assistance, onsite visits with clients are an integral part of that assistance.
- C. When programs, provisions, or initiatives exist (e.g., highly erodible land conservation provisions) that define other specific levels of planning for a resource issue, clients will be offered alternatives

that, at a minimum, meet the criteria of those programs, provisions, or initiatives. The conservation planner will encourage these clients to develop a conservation plan that follows the nine steps of conservation planning and address planning criteria for identified resource concerns. This will help the client identify and address resource concerns and provide a plan to use with other conservation related programs.

D. Short- and long-term resource management objectives of NRCS's clients are addressed through the development of individual conservation plans and areawide plans where clients develop plans with conservation planning assistance from NRCS, conservation districts, private sector consultants and contractors, technical service providers (TSPs), and other appropriate sources.

E. A conservation plan is the record of decisions and supporting information for treatment of a unit of land or water meeting planning criteria for one or more identified resource concerns as a result of the planning process. The plan includes a schedule of implementation for practices and activities needed to address identified resource concerns. The needs of the client, the resources, and Federal, State, territorial, Tribal, and local requirements will be met. The conservation plan may include multiple components that provide practices and management activities for specific resources. It is the responsibility of the client to acquire any additional plan approvals needed to meet specific Federal, State, Tribal, or local program requirements. The following is a list of possible components of conservation plans (not an all-inclusive list):

- (1) Comprehensive nutrient management plan (CNMP)
- (2) Irrigation water management (IWM) plan
- (3) Integrated pest management (IPM) plan
- (4) Forest management plan
- (5) Nutrient management plan (NMP)
- (6) Grazing management plan
- (7) Wildlife management plan
- (8) Conservation activity plans (CAPs)
- (9) Others as they are developed nationally or by States

F. Areawide conservation plans are voluntary, comprehensive plans for a watershed or other large geographic area. Areawide conservation planning must 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 that assesses their resource conditions and needs, sets goals, and identifies programs, alternative actions, and other resources to solve those needs. As a result, proposals are developed and recommendations are made 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 as tools to solve resource concerns on a broad scale. See Title 390, National Watershed Programs Manual, Part 505, for guidance for developing watershed project plans.

409.2 Conservation Planning Assistance Delivery

A. Conservation planning assistance provided by NRCS must comply with all civil rights acts, nondiscrimination statutes, and regulations of the Secretary of Agriculture.

B. NRCS traditionally provides conservation planning assistance on a request basis through working agreements with conservation districts and Tribes.

- (1) NRCS may enter into working agreements with other organizations and units of Government to provide conservation planning assistance as mutually agreed upon.

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- (2) The State conservationist will assess and determine the level of NRCS assistance to be provided in areas without conservation districts. NRCS may provide assistance for programs mandated by Congress independent of a working agreement with a conservation district.

C. As a Federal agency, NRCS recognizes and acknowledges its trust responsibilities to Indian Tribes, and is committed to Government-to-Government relationships with each Tribe. It is NRCS's policy to ensure that Tribal rights and concerns are taken into account, to take appropriate steps to remove impediments to working directly and effectively with Tribes, and to work with Tribes to achieve self-sufficiency. Based on its commitment to the Government-to-Government relationship and its trust responsibilities, NRCS will—

- (1) Operate within a Government-to-Government relationship with federally recognized Indian Tribes.
- (2) Consult, to the greatest extent practicable and permitted by law, with Indian Tribal Governments before taking action that affects federally recognized Indian Tribes.
- (3) Assess the impact of agency activities on Tribal trust resources and ensure that Tribal interests are considered before the activities are undertaken.
- (4) Remove procedural impediments to working directly with Tribal Governments on activities that affect trust property or Governmental rights of the Tribes.
- (5) Work cooperatively with other agencies to accomplish these goals established by Executive Order 13175, Consultation and Coordination With Indian Tribal Governments.

D. NRCS assistance to clients must meet all applicable Federal, State, territorial, Tribal, and local laws, program rules, policy statements, Executive orders, and international agreements.

E. Areawide conservation planning, especially for those situations with complex objectives, requires the use of interdisciplinary teams of specialists in the planning effort.

F. In complex situations, NRCS will employ an early scoping process to determine expected needs for NRCS services and other resources before committing to planning assistance.

G. If assistance on Federal or State lands require a significant amount of NRCS resources beyond the scoping process completed early in the planning process, an agreement that provides for reimbursement of NRCS services must be executed. All Tribal lands are excluded from this requirement. The State conservationist will determine when an agreement is required. See Title 440, Conservation Programs Manual, Part 525 (440-CPM-525), for additional policy.

H. National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements must be incorporated into all applicable steps and activities of NRCS-assisted planning activities and may not be considered as a separate process or requirement. See Title 190, General Manual, Part 410 (190-GM-410), for NRCS policy and procedures on compliance with NEPA. The level of NEPA documentation will depend on findings during the scoping process or the environmental evaluation (EE). The EE, which may lead to an environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS), must be conducted for all NRCS planning activities and is used to help determine the level of NEPA documentation required. Planners must identify the level of NEPA documentation required for each planning activity as early in the planning process as possible and incorporate activities into each planning step to ensure that information required for NEPA documentation is developed simultaneously with the plan document. Specific guidance related to general NRCS environmental compliance for NEPA, as well as all special environmental concerns (SECs) listed on the Form NRCS-CPA-52, "Environmental Evaluation Worksheet," can be found in 180-NPPH-600-H-600.71, and in Title 190, National Environmental Compliance Handbook, Part 610 (190-NECH-610).

409.3 Requirements for Providing Conservation Planning Assistance

A. Conservation Planner Designations

- (1) A conservation planner is a person who possesses the necessary skills, training, and experience to implement the NRCS planning process to meet client objectives in solving resource concerns. The conservation planner has demonstrated skill in assisting clients to identify resource problems, to express the client's short- and long-term objectives, to propose feasible solutions to resource problems, and encourages the client to choose and implement an effective alternative system that treats resource concerns, meets client's objectives, and meets all Federal policies.
- (2) NRCS recognizes the following conservation planner designations
 - (i) Apprentice conservation planner
 - (ii) Certified conservation planner
 - (iii) Master certified conservation planner
 - (iv) Technical specialist planner
- (3) The following persons are required to obtain the apprentice, certified or master certified conservation planner designations as defined in 180-GM-409-409.9.
 - (i) NRCS employees with conservation planning as a major duty included in their official position description.
 - (ii) Partner organization or agency employees acting on behalf of NRCS and independently assisting customers through the nine-step conservation planning process for developing RMS or progressive conservation plans for NRCS conservation programs.
- (4) Other NRCS or partner employees, Tribal members or employees, or private sector service providers (including TSPs) may be designated any of the four planner roles based on agency need and approval by the State conservationist.
- (5) The "technical specialist planner" designation may be given to candidates employed in a position with a description and classification that meets all of the following:
 - (i) Provides leadership at a State or area level for a specific scientific or technical discipline or multiple disciplines
 - (ii) Provides technical assistance, technical guidance, and training to conservation planners and perform quality assurance activities reviewing conservation planners' work that relates to their areas of expertise
 - (iii) Performs their duties with high levels of expertise and independence.
- (6) State conservationists or their designees will determine the specific planner designation an individual must earn and maintain based on the individual's position, affiliation, and duties.
- (7) Subsets of conservation planning roles may also be designated at the national or State level, such as "CNMP planner" (see 180-GM-409-409.10).

B. All conservation plans developed for NRCS purposes must be signed by an NRCS-designated certified conservation planner or master certified conservation planner. This includes but is not limited to plans developed by NRCS employees, partner employees, other agency employees, Tribal entities, or private sector service providers (including TSPs). When a conservation plan is being used to meet specific USDA program requirements under the authority of NRCS, such as highly erodible land compliance, it must also be approved by the appropriate NRCS official, as required by that program. The signature of the NRCS certified conservation planner or master certified conservation planner indicates that the conservation plan meets the needs of the client; NRCS conservation planning policy, procedures, and standards; and any applicable program or provision requirements.

C. The State conservationist must establish and implement a process to ensure training is provided to NRCS and partner employees delivering conservation planning services for the agency. This must include the following actions:

- (1) Developing State training needs and budgets for conservation planning training.
- (2) Developing a list of qualifications (knowledge, skills, and abilities) required for conservation planner designations in addition to the requirements listed in 180-GM-409-409.9C.
- (3) Providing employees access to training through NRCS training courses, on-the-job training (OJT), or equivalent courses and methods developed outside of NRCS and approved by the State conservationist and CPTAD Director as meeting the identified training need. Use of equivalent courses in lieu of formal NRCS courses will be done in consultation with the Director, CPTAD.
- (4) Ensuring that all individuals who approve conservation plans meet minimum NRCS certified conservation planner or master certified conservation planner requirements.
- (5) Ensuring State training opportunities are available to all existing and candidate designated conservation planners (including partner employees, other agency employees, Tribal entities, TSPs or other private sector planners), particularly part 2 of the NRCS Conservation Planning Course and the use of resource assessment tools.
- (6) Developing and keeping current the State-specific training module for conservation planning certification and recertification of TSPs.

D. The State conservationist will maintain a list using the national conservation planning database of all conservation planners in the State, including NRCS employees, volunteers, conservation district employees, participating State agency employees, and other partner organizations.

E. The CPTAD will maintain a list of all TSPs who meet national conservation planning criteria, as described in 180-GM-409-409.9D(12).

F. The State conservationist may enter into agreements with non-NRCS sources to become recommending organizations to certify conservation planners in accordance with procedures in 440-CPM-504. The State conservationist may also directly certify qualified individuals, such as third-party vendors, as conservation planners contingent upon these individuals satisfying NRCS requirements. Whether providing assistance to a recommending organization or directly certifying a qualified individual, the State conservationist will ensure that this assistance is consistent with existing NRCS policies and technical guidance.

G. All NRCS-designated conservation planners will develop conservation plans that contain conservation practices that meet all NRCS standards and specifications as documented in the FOTG.

409.4 Planning on Units That Cross a State, County, or Field Office Boundary

A. NRCS assistance on an individual planning area that crosses a State, county, or field office boundary is the responsibility of the field office where the majority of the land is located, unless otherwise agreed to by the client and respective State conservationists (see section 409.6 for work along international borders). Conservation planning will be consistent with the FOTG covering the area where the land is located.

B. For assistance to groups or units of Government on a planning area that crosses a State boundary, the State conservationists, in consultation with the client, will determine by mutual consent which State will have the lead responsibility for providing planning and other technical assistance.

409.5 Documentation of Conservation Planning Data and Signature Requirements

A. NRCS employees, partner employees, and others on the NRCS network must document and maintain conservation plan data using agency-approved tools and the official planning database, the

National Planning and Agreements Database (NPAD). See 130-GM-408 for mandatory electronic field office business tools.

B. The following terms are important to maintaining electronic conservation plan data:

- (1) Planning Land Unit (PLU).—A PLU is a unique geographic area, defined by a polygon, that has a common land use and land use modifier and is owned, operated, or managed by the same clients.
- (2) Spatial Data.—Information about the location and shapes of geographic features and the relationship between them; it is usually stored as coordinates and topology.
- (3) Topology.—The spatial relationship between connecting or adjacent features in a geographic data layer.
- (4) Geographic Database.—A collection of spatial data and their attributes, organized for efficient storage and retrieval.

C. To ensure data integrity and to implement a national planning database that is current, accurate, and useful for modeling and reporting purposes—

- (1) The PLUs for all active conservation planning will be spatially located (digitized and attributed) in the proper geographic data layer (active PLU layer) in the agency's official conservation planning database.
- (2) Each PLU in the active PLU layer will be associated with a unique geospatial boundary (polygon).
- (3) The following horizontal topology is required for PLUs in the active PLU layer:
 - (i) No overlapping of adjacent PLU boundaries (polygons)
 - (ii) No stacking of PLUs (polygons)
- (4) All planned conservation practices will be spatially located with its standard geometry (point, line, or polygon) in the proper geographic data layer (practice layer) in the agency's official conservation planning database.

D. The NRCS copy of the conservation plan and associated documents and worksheets will be maintained in combination of hardcopy and electronically, as appropriate.

E. Conservation plan documents may be made available to the customer in electronic format, hardcopy, or both.

F. Conservation plans will be signed as indicated below in the order listed.

- (1) The plan is signed by an NRCS-designated certified conservation planner or master certified conservation planner indicating the plan meets client objectives and all NRCS policy, procedures, and standards.
- (2) The plan is signed by the decision maker, indicating acceptance of the conservation system alternative. Other associated customers may sign based on the wishes of the decision maker.
- (3) The plan may be signed by the conservation district, per NRCS and conservation district policy as specified under mutual, cooperative working, operational, and contribution agreements and in accordance with the confidentiality provisions of section 1619 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008.
- (4) Some Federal, State, Tribal, or local program requirements may call for additional signatures. These additional approvals are not required by NRCS, but may be necessary to meet the client's objectives. Therefore, it is the client's responsibility to obtain these additional signatures.

409.6 Conservation Planning Assistance That May Have International Impacts

Assistance provided will comply with 280-GM-400, “International Conservation Programs.” State conservationists will contact the CPTAD for further guidance when conservation planning assistance is outside of the 50 States and U.S. territories, such as planning on a tract of land or property that is located on both sides of the U.S. border.

409.7 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) of 1966 and Privacy Act (PA) of 1974

NRCS policy and procedures on FOIA and PA are contained in National Instruction (NI) 120-300 and 120-GM-408-C.

409.8 Public Participation in the Planning Process

A. Public participation is an integral part of the NRCS planning process and is described in 400-GM-400. Opportunities for public participation and involvement will be provided throughout the planning process to provide for a full partnership when working with groups (not acting as individuals), communities, and units of Government. The locally led process and areawide planning utilize public participation.

B. Individual conservation plans do not normally require public participation except when required by State, Tribal, or local laws or when they include public lands. For conservation plans involving public lands, the client will work with the public land management agency.

C. Every areawide conservation planning effort will include a public participation component to the extent determined by the State conservationist. Requirements for public participation are specified in NEPA, Executive orders, departmental memoranda, and NRCS policy.

D. In its public participation activities, NRCS will—

- (1) Provide opportunities for the public to contribute information and express opinions at various stages of the planning process, decision-making process, or both.
- (2) Inform the public early and throughout the process regarding NRCS policy, program development, and NRCS-assisted resource planning.
- (3) Evaluate, then carefully consider all information presented and views expressed.
- (4) When applicable, acknowledge written comments and report decisions to the public.

409.9 Criteria to Achieve an NRCS Conservation Planner Role Designation

A. Prerequisites

Individual must be one of the following:

- (i) An existing NRCS or partner employee
- (ii) A private sector service provider, including a TSP or an individual seeking TSP certification
- (iii) A volunteer

B. Policy References

- (1) 180-GM-409
- (2) 180-NPPH-600
- (3) 190-GM-417

C. Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

- (1) At a minimum, NRCS-designated conservation planners must have a basic understanding of agricultural production systems, economics, plant and animal sciences, ecological systems, natural resources, State and local environmental laws and regulations, and conservation practices common to the region where they work.
- (2) Candidates must possess and demonstrate the following knowledge, skills, and abilities:
 - (i) Knowledge of national conservation programs
 - (ii) Skill in applying the NRCS nine-step conservation planning process
 - (iii) Skill in assessing resource concerns
 - (iv) Ability to plan and implement conservation practices common to the work area
 - (v) Knowledge of NRCS FOTG standards and specifications for applicable conservation practices in the State and locality
 - (vi) Skill in applying approved erosion prediction technology
 - (vii) Skill in using applicable site vulnerability assessment tools
 - (viii) Knowledge of Federal, State, territorial, Tribal, and local laws and regulations
 - (ix) Ability to accurately complete Form NRCS-CPA-52, “Environmental Evaluation Worksheet”
 - (x) Knowledge of policy and procedures to protect cultural resources and historic properties
 - (xi) Skill in communicating with landowners and operators
 - (xii) Skill in evaluating alternatives considering economic viability of agricultural operations
 - (xiii) Ability to evaluate production headquarters areas of farmsteads, including animal feeding operations common to the region, and develop conservation solutions as needed.
- (3) The State conservationist may develop a list of additional qualifications (knowledge, skills, and abilities) required for the conservation planner designation. TSPs are required to meet only the knowledge, skills, and abilities identified in sections 409.9C (1) and (2).

D. Conservation Planner Role Designation Requirements

- (1) States must follow all national minimum requirements for designating conservation planner roles and may add additional State requirements needed to comply with State law or meet special circumstances. State requirements must receive concurrence from the Director, CPTAD. For specific TSP planner designation requirements, see section 409.9D(12).
- (2) State conservationists designate conservation planner roles in their States. This authority may be delegated to others by the State conservationist.
- (3) The following conservation planner designations are available as appropriate for an individual’s position and duties. See section 409.3 A for who may need these designations.
 - (i) Apprentice Conservation Planner
 - The apprentice conservation planner is not a certified conservation planner and is not authorized to sign conservation plans.
 - The apprentice conservation planner role may lead to other planner roles, or be an end point for those who do not need the more advanced training and are not required to review and approve other planner’s work.
 - The apprentice conservation planner may determine client objectives, conduct resource inventories, run assessment tools, and develop alternative solutions to address resource concerns for planning areas.
 - The apprentice conservation planner’s work must be reviewed and approved by a certified conservation planner or a master certified conservation planner prior to the final discussion of alternatives with the client. This includes the completed NRCS-CPA-52, “Environmental Evaluation Worksheet.”

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- A final plan and block P of the NRCS-CPA-52 developed by an apprentice conservation planner must be signed by a certified conservation planner or master certified conservation planner.
 - For NRCS employees with conservation planning being a major duty included in their position description, State conservationists may set time periods to achieve the apprentice conservation planner role (e.g., a soil conservationist will achieve the apprentice conservation planner role within 12 months of their effective date of employment in that position).
 - Complete the following minimum requirements to become an apprentice conservation planner:
 - “Conservation Planning: Part 1” (AgLearn)
 - “Introduction to Field Office Technical Guide” (AgLearn)
 - “Cultural Resource Training Series Part 1” (AgLearn)
 - “Environmental Evaluation Webinar Series No. 1-2” (S&T Training Library)
 - No. 1: Primer on NRCS Environmental compliance
 - No. 2: Documenting the Environmental Evaluation on the NRCS-CPA-52, “Environmental Evaluation Worksheet”
 - The following “Water Quality Webinar Series modules” (AgLearn)
 - No. 1: Overview of Water Quality Resource Assessment
 - No. 2: Nitrogen Management and Concerns
 - No. 4: Sediment Management
 - No. 5: Water Bodies
 - Conservation planning business tool training (e.g., Toolkit or Conservation Desktop (State or national course)). Partner or private sector conservation planner (including TSPs) candidates will not be required to complete Conservation Planning Business Tools training if they do not have access to the appropriate NRCS conservation planning application.
 - Assessment tools training specific to the employee’s location (OJT, State or national)
 - Training on using planning criteria to identify resource concerns (e.g., Conservation Planning on Grazing Lands course (State, national, or OJT))
 - Basic Soils and Web Soil Survey to interpret land capabilities and limitations (State, national, or OJT)
 - State-specific training and required deliverables determined by the State conservationist and concurred by CPTAD
 - Appropriate job approval authority for conservation practices common to the work area and the position (see paragraph D(4) below)
- (ii) Certified Conservation Planner
- The certified conservation planner designation is the primary role for those regularly delivering conservation planning assistance to clients.
 - The certified conservation planner may conduct all steps of the conservation planning process without supervision for progressive and resource management system level plans for all land uses and resource concerns common to their work area.
 - Certified conservation planners may approve or disapprove apprentice planners’ work and sign conservation plans to indicate the plan meets client objectives and meets applicable NRCS policy, procedures, and conservation practice standards.
 - Certified conservation planners may sign the NRCS-CPA-52, “Environmental Evaluation Worksheet,” as the planners in block P, regardless of whether or not they are the responsible Federal official who signs in block S.

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- For NRCS employees with conservation planning being a major duty included in their position description, the State conservationist may set time periods to achieve the certified conservation planner role (e.g., a soil conservationist will achieve the certified planner role within 2 years of their effective date of employment in that position).
- Complete the following minimum requirements to become a certified conservation planner:
 - Required training for an apprentice conservation planner
 - “Conservation Planning: Part 2” (instructor-led offered by State or national) or attending “Conservation Planning Boot Camp” may be substituted for the instructor-led “Conservation Planning Course, Part 2”
 - “Conservation Planning: Part 3” (develop RMS plan including the NRCS-CPA-52)
 - The candidate will be accompanied to the field by the State conservationist designee to meet with the decision maker.
 - The candidate will be expected to demonstrate competency in the planning process and plan development as well as interpersonal skills representing excellent customer service.
 - At a minimum, the conservation plan components listed in section 409.13 should be documented in the plan or associated material.
 - The observer will evaluate the candidate’s interaction with the decision maker (landowner or land operator) in the planning process to determine whether all client objectives and resource concerns associated with the planning area are adequately addressed and whether the client understands the alternatives presented and feels satisfied in the planning assistance provided.
 - Field-reviewed plans will be approved by the State conservationist or designee prior to final delivery to the decision maker.
 - The following “Water Quality Webinar Series modules” (AgLearn)
 - No. 3: Phosphorous Management and Concerns
 - No. 6: Pest Management and Water Quality Implications
 - No. 7: Water Management
 - “Cultural Resources Training Series Part 2” (State)
 - “Environmental Evaluation Webinar Series No. 3-11” (S&T Training Library)
 - No. 3: Planning for Floodplain and Riparian Area Special Environmental Concerns
 - No. 4: Planning for Wetlands and Clean Water Act Special Environmental Concerns
 - No. 5: Planning for Prime and Unique Farmland and Invasive Species Special Environmental Concern
 - No. 6: Planning for Endangered Species/Migratory Birds/Bald and Golden Eagles Special Environmental Concern
 - No. 7: Planning for Natural Areas, Scenic Beauty, and Wild and Scenic Rivers Special Environmental Concern
 - No. 8: Planning for Clean Air and Environmental Justice Special Environmental Concern
 - No. 9: Planning for Essential Fish Habitat, Coastal Zones, and Coral Reef Special Environmental Concerns
 - No. 10: Planning for Cultural Resources Special Environmental Concerns and Making NEPA Finding
 - No. 11: Appropriate Use of Categorical Exclusions

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- “Soil Health and Sustainability for Field Staff” (NEDC, instructor-led or online with a field component) or State-sponsored soil health training providing equivalent content, see paragraph D(9) for details.
 - “Economics of Conservation Planning Course” (AgLearn and instructor-led)
 - “Air Quality, Climate Change, and Energy Course” (AgLearn)
 - Fundamentals of highly erodible land (HEL) and wetland conservation (WC) provisions training (AgLearn, State, or OJT)
 - A minimum of one “Working Effectively with” training course (instructor-led). The following instructor-led training courses may be used to satisfy this requirement:
 - Working Effectively with Livestock Producers
 - Working Effectively with American Indians
 - Working Effectively with Alaskan Natives
 - Working Effectively with Hispanic Producers
 - Working Effectively with Asian-American Pacific Islander Producers
 - Improving Conservation Delivery to Women Landowners and Producers
 - Extending Outreach to All Customers
 - State-specific training and required deliverables determined by the State conservationist and concurred by CPTAD.
 - Appropriate job approval authority for conservation practices common to the work area and position; see paragraph D(4) below.
 - Successfully passing a NRCS-approved national proficiency exam may be substituted for certain minimum requirements to become a certified conservation planner.
- (iii) Master Certified Conservation Planner
- The master certified conservation planner designation is an advanced role for those planners having the experience, knowledge, skill and ability to address complex planning situations, train others in the application of the conservation planning process and conduct State-level reviews of conservation plans.
 - The master certified conservation planner may conduct all steps of the conservation planning process without supervision for progressive and resource management system level plans for all land uses and resource concerns common to their State. This person may lead areawide conservation planning efforts within the State, lead conservation planning training efforts and lead quality control reviews and spot checks. This does not preclude other State conservationist’s designees from performing conservation planning training, quality assurance reviews, or spot checks.
 - The master certified conservation planner may approve or disapprove apprentice planners’ work and sign conservation plans to indicate the plan meets client objectives and meets applicable NRCS policy, procedures, and conservation practice standards.
 - For NRCS employees with conservation planning being a major duty included in their position description, the State conservationist may set time periods to achieve the master certified planner role (e.g., an area resource conservationist must achieve the master certified conservation planner role within 18 months of their effective date of employment in that position).
 - Complete the following minimum requirements to become a master certified conservation planner:
 - Required training for the apprentice and certified conservation planner roles
 - “Areawide Conservation Planning Course” (AgLearn and instructor-led)
 - Provide significant contribution in the first seven steps of the conservation planning process for one areawide conservation plan submitted for review and approval by

State conservationist's designee. This requirement may be fulfilled as an individual or as a member of a team. The State conservationist may utilize the technology specialist at the regional national technical center for plan reviews if expertise is not available in State.

- Assist master certified conservation planners or the State conservationist's designee with two State quality reviews. One may be outside of the employee's home State.
- Serve as an instructor along with one or more master conservation planners or State conservationist designees for two conservation planning training sessions (State or national). One may be outside of the employee's home State.
- State-specific training and required deliverables determined by the State conservationist and concurred with by CPTAD.
- Appropriate job approval authority for practices common to the work area and position; see paragraph D(4) below.

(iv) Technical Specialist Planner

- The technical specialist planner designation is an optional designation that provides States a means to ensure those who serve in area or statewide technical assistance positions are capable of providing conservation planning assistance that is aligned with the agency's conservation planning procedures, and other requirements. The criteria for the technical specialist planner designation also support the agency's maintenance of the professional knowledge and skills necessary to provide leadership in the area of expertise they have responsibility for. After considering the technical specialist planner designation policy in its entirety, State conservationists can determine which specialist positions in the State may use the designation.
- Employees with the technical specialist planner designation may also be designated one of the other three planner roles.
- The technical specialist planner may—
 - Provide training on components of conservation planning that relate to their areas of expertise on all land uses.
 - Provide support for areawide conservation planning efforts within the State.
 - Perform quality assurance reviews and spot checks for conservation practices and conservation plans.
 - Complete blocks A through P on Form NRCS-CPA-52, "Environmental Evaluation Worksheet," to address the client information, resource concerns and special environmental concerns. (Note: Only a designated responsible Federal official (RFO) may complete blocks Q through S of the NRCS-CPA-52.)
- Candidates must demonstrate to the State conservationist or their designee an ability to review conservation plans that meet criteria in the NPPH as well as CPA-52s prepared by conservation planners to ensure all resource concerns, client objectives, and special environmental concerns have been identified and adequately addressed by the alternatives developed.
- To earn the technical specialist planner designation, the candidate must meet all of the following criteria and record completions through NRCS's official learning management system:
 - Complete two quality assurance activities that evaluate conservation plans and practice implementation related to their area or areas of expertise to the satisfaction of the technical supervisor.
 - Deliver two State or national technical training programs that instruct other conservation planners in using NRCS planning procedures relative to their position's area of expertise.

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- Complete the national and State training required for the “apprentice planner” designation if the candidate does not already meet the requirements for a “certified planner” or “master certified planner” designation.
 - Complete “Conservation Planning: Part 2” (instructor-led, offered by State) or complete the national Conservation Boot Camp.
 - Complete part 1 (online) and part 2 (instructor led) of the cultural resources training series.
 - Complete Environmental Evaluation Webinar Series, Numbers 3 through 11 (from the NRCS S&T Webinar Library).
 - Complete “Conservation Planning Course, Part 3.” This involves completing a conservation plan, including RMS alternatives, that is related to the candidate’s position and area of expertise, then earning a satisfactory in-field review by the State conservationist’s designee.
 - Complete State-identified training and required deliverables that are applicable to the specialist’s discipline area. States may develop training requirements that are unique for each discipline the “technical specialist planner” designation will be used for.
- (4) The State conservationist will establish the minimum job approval authority required for each planner role designation based on the conservation practices common in their State and job approval authority requirements in 190-GM-417, “Ecological Sciences Job Approval Authority,” and 210-GM-402 and Title 210, National Engineering Manual, Part 501, “Engineering Job Approval Authority.”
- (5) Although employees designated as any of the four conservation planner roles retain their designation when relocating to another State, they may not immediately have full privileges in that State.
- (i) The State conservationist will establish a procedure for reviewing and assigning State conservation planner designations for individuals relocating to their State.
 - (ii) When certified conservation planners and master certified conservation planners are relocated or detailed to a State where they have not yet been assigned a planner designation, their work must be reviewed by certified planners or master certified planners who are designated in that State. Once the State conservationist or his or her designee is satisfied that the relocated planner has sufficient knowledge of the State to independently provide planning assistance, he or she may assign the planner the full designation for that State. The planner may need to work several months in the State before being assigned their planner designation for their State. The planner should also be marked “complete” in AgLearn as having met the requirements for the specific State. See the employee, supervisor, and training officer guides for details.
 - (iii) Submission and review of conservation plans produced at the former duty station may be used to demonstrate qualifications at the discretion of the State conservationist.
 - (iv) For States with training requirements that surpass national minimum requirements (see section 409.9D(1)), conservation planners must complete those State requirements prior to being assigned the planner designation for that State.
 - (v) Once the planner has been designated as one of the four roles, their record can be transferred through the National Conservation Planner Database from the previous State to the new State. See the “National Conservation Planner Database User Guide” for detailed instructions for transferring a planner record from one State to another.
- (6) Individuals working in multiple States as a conservation planner must be assigned planner role designations by each State conservationist.

- (7) The State conservationist may establish programs to designate third-party vendors and other individuals as conservation planners. These programs should meet the minimum requirements in section 409.9D(3).
- (8) Required training may be provided through NRCS training courses, OJT, or external courses and other methods approved by the State conservationist and CPTAD as meeting an identified training requirement. Use of external courses or other methods to meet an identified training requirement will be done in consultation with the Director, CPTAD. An individual with proof of completing a course as part of the minimum national requirements for any role, will not have to take the course again unless retraining is identified as an appropriate response to a deficiency observed during the State quality assurance process. See paragraphs E and F below.
- (9) Use of equivalent courses in lieu of required formal NRCS courses must be approved by the Director, CPTAD.
 - (i) States may request approval of training course equivalency in lieu of NEDC training courses or Science and Technology Training Library training courses, or request approval for State soil health training by submitting the following information to the Director, CPTAD.
 - Is the course approval for past delivered courses, future delivered courses or both (include dates of past delivery, if available)
 - The agenda or curriculum for the training course
 - Credentials and expertise of course instructors
 - A description of relevant materials and environments utilized for the requested course
 - (ii) Upon receiving a request for use of equivalent courses or State soil health training, the Director, CPTAD, will consult with appropriate subject matter experts (SMEs) and NEDC to evaluate the merits of the course for conservation planning designation.
 - (iii) If the requested training course is approved, the Director, CPTAD, will provide a response to the requesting State.
 - The Director, NEDC, will assist the requesting State with the development of an AgLearn item that may be used as substitute item for the original course (For approved State soil health training, use item number NRCS-NHQ-LOCAL-000004). For approved State soil health training courses, the requesting State may consult with the appropriate Soil Health Division specialist for assistance with implementation of the course.
 - The requesting State will ensure that individuals who complete (or completed if the course was previously provided) the training course receive credit in AgLearn using the substitute AgLearn item.
 - The requesting State will include the approved course equivalency in their State supplement to 180-GM-409-409.11, “Reserved for State Equivalency Course List.” Credit will not be granted in AgLearn until the State supplement with the new course has been published.
 - (iv) If the request for equivalency or State soil health training is not approved,
 - The Director, CPTAD, will collaborate with SMEs and NEDC to provide the requesting State a written explanation of the deficiencies in the training course that prevented it from approval.
 - The requesting State may submit an updated request for reconsideration to the Director, CPTAD. This request must include an explanation of how identified deficiencies have been addressed. The request for reconsideration will follow the same procedure as a new request.

- (10) The State conservationist is responsible for keeping the national conservation planner database updated with current conservation planner information for their State.
 - (i) Updates will take place whenever changes in personnel or planner status takes place.
 - (ii) When employees have planner designations in multiple States, each State will manage the records separately.
- (11) NRCS conservation planners are responsible for keeping their own individual development plan updated to reflect conservation planning training needed and completed to maintain or increase their skill level.
- (12) TSP National Conservation Planner Requirements
 - (i) TSPs obtain apprentice conservation planner or certified conservation planner designations by completing the requirements in section 409.9D(3) with the following exceptions:
 - TSP planner designation candidates will complete the “TSP Orientation and Conservation Planning Course” in lieu of “Conservation Planning Part 1.”
 - TSP apprentice conservation planner candidates must complete one field-reviewed RMS plan for a conservation management unit with a minimum of two land uses (e.g., cropland and farmstead). TSPs seeking planning designation in multiple States are not required to submit additional plans for review to each State.
 - The candidate must be accompanied to the field by a NRCS certified or master certified conservation planner to meet with the plan decision maker.
 - The candidate is expected to demonstrate competency in the planning process, to include the appropriate resource assessment tools and plan development.
 - The field reviewed conservation plan will be submitted to the State conservationist for the State where the plan was developed with a letter from the reviewer acknowledging the field review and recommendation for certification. The plan review process will follow the policy outlined in 440-CPM-504-C-504.24E(2), for plan review submission, review, and recommendation.
 - If the State conservationist concurs with the recommendation, the letter will be forwarded to the national TSP team leader documenting the State conservationist’s concurrence.
 - TSP apprentice conservation planner candidates will not be required to complete Conservation Planning Business Tools training.
 - (ii) NRCS job approval authority requirements do not apply to TSPs for any planner designation.
 - (iii) State-specific training modules for each State where planning will be conducted must be completed for all planner designations.
 - (iv) The TSP must complete any additional training or licensing required by State laws or regulations in the State where work is being performed.
 - (v) When all requirements are met, the national TSP Team leader will certify the TSP at the appropriate planner designation.
 - (vi) Successfully passing a NRCS-approved national proficiency exam may be substituted for certain minimum requirements to become a certified conservation planner.
 - (vii) TSPs obtaining planner designation through this process will be allowed to conduct conservation planning in all States where they have completed the State-specific training module and meet any additional training or licensing required by State law or regulation in the State where work is being performed.
 - (viii) A TSP who has been designated as a certified conservation planner prior to the date of this policy release and comes up for renewal under this policy will be grandfathered as a certified conservation planner until the following certification renewal date (3 years from being grandfathered). At their next renewal date, the TSP must have completed all

required training under the current certified conservation planner policy to maintain their planner designation. Not completing all of the required training will result in the TSP losing his or her planner designation or being designated an apprentice planner provided he or she has completed the requirements for the apprentice designation.

E. Maintaining Conservation Planner Role Designations

- (1) This policy does not apply to TSPs. National requirements for TSPs to maintain conservation planning certification are provided in 180-GM-409-409.9E(11).
- (2) State conservationists will establish a process and assign tasks to review each planner's designation at least once every 3 years.
- (3) The State conservationist's review will include a review of records produced by the planner during the current designation period to determine if the planner has completed all of the following:
 - (i) Demonstrated they have maintained or improved upon the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to earn their designation.
 - (ii) Completed a minimum of 40 contact hours of continuing education during the 3-year cycle that are related to conservation planning, conservation practices, or new conservation technology. These contact hours may be obtained anytime during the applicable designation period.
- (4) The State conservationist's review of each planner designation will conclude with a determination of whether the planner's designation will be—
 - (i) Renewed.
 - (ii) Suspended. Findings, corrective actions and instructions for completion will be documented in writing.
- (5) Upon completion of a designation review, the State conservationist or their designee must update the planner's record in the national planner database to reflect the outcome of the designation review.
 - (i) Planners are responsible for maintaining their individual planner designation. Maintaining planner designation includes keeping track of completed trainings and reviewing and updating their individual development plan annually with their supervisor.
 - (ii) Training progress and knowledge, skills, and abilities must be reviewed with supervisors during annual performance reviews.
- (6) Continuing Education Requirements
 - (i) A minimum of 5 contact hours of the required 40 contact hours must be earned by successfully completing a course or activity that has content areas that focus on outreach or customer service, or improving methods of business practices or operations or otherwise advancing skills and work-practices as applicable to the delivery of voluntary conservation planning and implementation assistance.
 - (ii) Courses and training completed to achieve a higher planner certification level may be counted as continuing education contact hours for a planner's current designation.
 - (iii) Continuing education contact hours may be earned through NRCS or privately funded as follows:
 - Successful completion of a college course
 - Successful completion of a continuing education course
 - Successful completion of a short course, tutorial, or distance-education course offered through correspondence, recordings, or the internet
 - Presenting or attending qualifying webinars, seminars, in-house courses, workshops, or professional or technical presentations made at meetings, conventions, or conferences
 - Teaching or instructing items listed above

- Authoring published papers, articles, books, or accepted licensing examination items
 - Reading current technical articles or books relating to conservation planning or related discipline
 - Active participation in professional or technical societies
 - Active participation in educational outreach activities pertaining to conservation planner designation that involve high school students, college students, or adults
 - OJT provided by a discipline specialist
- (iv) A continuing education contact hour is defined as 1 hour of instruction or presentation. The conversion of other units of credit to contact hours is provided in figure 409-1.
- (v) Recertification and continuing education hours should be recorded in NRCS’s official learning management system (AgLearn).

Figure 409-1: Conversion of Other Units of Credit to Contact Hours

1 college or unit semester hour	45 Contact Hours
1 college or unit quarter hour	30 Contact Hours
1 hour of professional-level coursework, webinar, seminar, or professional meeting, convention, or conference either attending or presenting	1 Contact Hour
*For teaching in this category, multiply the units of credit by two, but the following exception applies: <i>Credit is only available for teaching the first presentation of a training program, not for subsequent presentations.</i>	
Each published peer-reviewed paper or article in the planner’s area of professional practice	10 Contact Hours
Each published non-peer-reviewed paper or article in the planner’s area of professional practice	5 Contact Hours
Active participation as an officer or committee member in a scientific professional organization or society	2 Contact Hours (For each organization, per year performed.)
1 hour of conservation outreach activity or OJT provided by a discipline specialist	1 Contact Hour (Limited to 6 contact hours for outreach and 10 contact hours for OJT during a 3-year designation cycle)
1 hour reading current technical articles or books	1 Contact Hour (Limited to 10 contact hours during a 3-year designation cycle)

(7) Determination of Credit

- (i) The State conservationist has final authority with respect to approval of courses, credit, and other methods of earning credit.
- (ii) Credit for university or college approved courses will be based upon course credit established by the institution attended.

- (iii) Credit for qualifying seminars and workshops will be based on 1 contact hour for each hour of attendance. Attendance at qualifying programs presented at professional or technical society meetings will earn contact hours for the actual time of each program.
 - (iv) Credit for active participation in professional and technical societies (limited to 2 contact hours per organization, per year served) requires that a conservation planner serve as an officer or actively participate in a committee of the organization. Contact hours are not creditable until 12 months of performance in the role have been completed.
- (8) Recordkeeping
- (i) Planners are responsible for maintaining their own records and for providing documentation that contact-hour requirements needed for redesignation are met during the 3-year designation period. In addition, planners should record the details of the training in NRCS's official learning management system (AgLearn). Please see the employee guide for additional information. Planners should consult their supervisor or training officer for additional information and assistance.
 - (ii) Planners are responsible for maintaining records to be used to support credits claimed. Copies of these records should be uploaded in AgLearn when marking completions for the recertification training. Records required include, but are not limited to—
 - A log showing the type of activity claimed, sponsoring organization, location, duration, instructor's or speaker's name, and contact hours earned.
 - Attendance verification records in the form of completion certificates or other documents supporting evidence of attendance.
 - Other acceptable training records, including—
 - Training certificate with the planner's name and date on the certificate.
 - Training recorded in the planner's AgLearn Learning History.
 - A training event sign-in sheet accompanied by an agenda that identifies all of the following:
 - Title of the training event
 - Provider of the training
 - Summary of the technical training
 - Duration of technical training
 - Date of the training
 - A log of OJT experience listing the subject, the time spent doing the activity, the instructor or mentor's name, and a description of the outcome for each OJT event (e.g., design completed, specification written, reviewed for job approval authority, etc.).
 - (iii) State conservationists may determine the record types and may determine additional contact hours are required in a State to maintain the "certified conservation planner" designation.
 - (iv) State conservationists may establish a list of programmatically approved, non-NRCS technical training providers that are qualified to provide credit for meeting this requirement (e.g., a State department of agriculture, cooperative extension service, State natural resource agencies, Tribal natural resource agencies, and scientific-discipline-related professional organizations and societies).
- (9) Exemptions From Continuing Education Requirements

Planners may submit a written request to the State conservationist for an exemption from a portion of the continuing professional training requirements for one of the following reasons:

- A planner serving on temporary duty assignment exceeding 120 consecutive days in a year is exempt from obtaining 10 of the contact hours required during the renewal period.

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- A planner serving in an active duty military assignment lasting more than 120 consecutive days in a year is exempt from obtaining 10 of the contact hours required during the renewal period.
 - A planner experiencing physical disability, illness, or other extenuating circumstances may apply for an exemption of some or all of the contact hours or an extension of time to obtain the credits, subject to the review and approval of the State conservationist or their designee. Supporting documentation will be furnished to the State conservationist or designee.
 - Conservation planners who become inactive through retirement or other circumstances who certify that they are not receiving any remuneration for providing professional technical assistance for conservation plans or practices and return to active practice of conservation planning as an NRCS employee, partner employee, or volunteer within 5 years must earn a minimum of 10 continuing education contact hours and appropriate job approval authority before regaining apprentice, certified planner, or master certified planner status. Retirees and others returning to active practice of conservation planning after more than 5 years of inactivity must be recertified based on a training plan developed by the State conservationist's designee.
 - Conservation planners who become inactive due to lack of use or lack of redesignation but continue to work in an NRCS field, area, or State office (e.g., promoted to a nonplanner position) are exempt from the continuing education requirements. In the event such an individual elects to return to active practice of conservation planning, a minimum of 10 continuing education contact hours and appropriate job approval authority must be earned before regaining apprentice, certified planner, or master certified planner status.
- (10) Technical Specialist Planner Requirements for Maintaining Designation
- (i) Technical specialist planners are responsible for maintaining their designation during a 3-year cycle. To maintain the designation, the technical specialist planner must complete all training necessary to maintain and update skills.
 - (ii) At the time for review of a person's designation, the technical specialist planner provides their technical supervisor documentation of the following items completed during the preceding 3-year designation period:
 - Technical training delivered to conservation planners that is related to the specialist's areas of responsibility or technical expertise
 - Assistance for quality assurance activities completed that are related to the specialist's areas of responsibility for technical expertise
 - Records showing a minimum of 40 contact hours of training related to the specialist's areas of responsibility for technical expertise have been completed.
 - (iii) The following parts of policy must be applied to determinations about continuing education for the "technical specialist planner" designation:
 - Definitions for contact hours at 180-GM-409-409.9E(6)
 - Determinations of credit at 180-GM-409-409.9E(7)
 - Recordkeeping requirements at 180-GM-409-409.9E(8)
 - Permissible exemptions at 180-GM-409-409.9E(9)
 - (iv) At the conclusion of a technical specialist planner's designation review, the technical supervisor will forward their recommendation for redesignating or revoking the "technical specialist planner" designation to the State conservationist or their designee, accompanied by copies of the examples the technical specialist planner provided.
 - (v) If an individual fails to meet the qualifications or criteria established for "technical specialist planner" designation, his or her designation must be suspended by the State

conservationist and appropriate corrective action must be taken by the technical supervisor.

- When a “technical specialist planner” designation is suspended, a candidate may seek redesignation based on guidelines established by the State conservationist or his or her designee.
- Candidates will present proof of that continuing education requirements have been met when seeking redesignation.

(11) TSP National Requirements for Maintaining Planner Designation

- (i) Each TSP’s planner designation must be reviewed at least once every 3 years by the State conservationist or designee in the TSP’s resident State.
 - The review will be based on conservation plans completed by the TSP in that State during the time period being reviewed.
 - Conservation plans reviewed may be progressive, so an RMS planned level of treatment is not required.
- (ii) If a TSP did not develop any conservation plans in the resident State during the review period, the State conservationist of the TSP’s resident State, after consultation with the national TSP Program manager, will have the review completed by a State where the TSP did work during the review period. Refer to policy in 440-CPM-504-C-504.26B(2) for plan reviews outside of resident States.
- (iii) If a TSP has not developed any conservation plans in the past 3 years, a new plan must be prepared for review as outlined in section 409.9D(12)(iv).
- (iv) The TSP must review the State-specific training module for each State in which he or she will recertify so as to be aware of any updated information.

F. Quality Assurance

- (1) The State conservationist is responsible for maintaining the conservation planner designation process in the State quality assurance plan.
 - (i) Each conservation planner’s designation must be reviewed at least once every 3 years by the State conservationist or designee.
 - (ii) A sufficient number of conservation plans must be reviewed to determine that the conservation plans meet the NRCS planning policy and follow the procedures and guidelines listed in NPPH.
 - (iii) If an individual fails to demonstrate competence for the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for conservation planner designation, the role will be suspended and the individual must be recertified before providing conservation planning assistance, based on a training plan developed by a State conservationist designee.
 - (iv) Applicants must present proof of training met to maintain their planner designation during planner role designation reviews.
 - (v) An individual may have a higher planner designation suspended while retaining a lower designation. For instance, a certified planner could have that designation suspended but maintain an apprentice designation.
 - (vi) NRCS is responsible for TSP quality assurance.
 - (vii) NRCS quality assurance policy and guidance can be found in 450-GM-407, “Documentation, Certification, and Spot Checking.”
- (2) State conservationists must incorporate measures into the State’s quality assurance plan (required by 340-GM-404) to determine if technical specialist planner designees are providing assistance according to NRCS conservation planning procedures, conservation practice standards, and other applicable national and State policies. Development of State procedures to evaluate technical specialist planners work quality during spot checks and quality assurance reviews is encouraged.

- (i) State conservationists must ensure that procedures are in use that provide all technical specialist planners in the State a review and redesignation determination at least once every 3 years.
- (ii) State conservationists must ensure procedures are in use to update the State's technical specialist planner records in the national conservation planner database.

409.10 Criteria to Achieve an NRCS Comprehensive Nutrient Management Planner Designation

A. Prerequisites

- (1) Individual must be one of the following:
 - (i) An existing NRCS or partner employee
 - (ii) A private sector service provider, including a TSP or an individual seeking TSP certification
 - (iii) A volunteer
- (2) See 190-GM-405-B-405.11, for CNMP approval and signature requirements.
- (3) CNMP planners may not approve the overall conservation plan unless also designated as certified planner or master certified planner.

B. Policy Reference

190-GM-405

C. Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

- (1) At a minimum, CNMP planners designated by NRCS in each State to develop and implement CNMPs must understand the following:
 - (i) How the FOTG relates to specific elements of the CNMP for which expertise is being provided
 - (ii) How to apply the technical criteria associated with the various elements of a CNMP as contained in the NRCS FOTG
 - (iii) How local, State, territorial, Tribal, and Federal laws and regulations affect the elements of a CNMP
- (2) The State conservationist may develop a list of additional qualifications (knowledge, skills, and abilities) required for the CNMP planner designation. TSPs are required to meet only the knowledge, skills, and abilities identified in section 409.10C(1).

D. Certification Requirements

- (1) States must follow all national requirements and any additional State requirements. For TSP CNMP certification requirements, see section 409.10D(8).
- (2) The State conservationist must establish a State certification process and criteria to certify CNMP planners.
- (3) The State conservationist must ensure that all pertinent State certification and licensing requirements (e.g., engineering license, engineering approval authority, certified nutrient management consultant or technical specialist) are met as part of any program established.
- (4) The State conservationist must establish a procedure for reviewing and approving CNMP planner designations for individuals relocating to their State.
- (5) The State conservationist may establish programs to certify third-party vendors and other individuals who are not TSPs.
- (6) State conservationists are responsible for keeping the national conservation planner database updated with current CNMP planner information for their States. Each third-party

certification program approved by NRCS must maintain a current list of specialists certified by that program and make it available to the State conservationist. CPTAD must maintain a list of all TSPs who meet national and State certified CNMP criteria in the TSP online registry.

- (7) Training
- (i) The State conservationist may require additional training necessary to receive the CNMP planner designation in their State.
 - (ii) Training may be provided through NRCS training courses, OJT, or equivalent courses and methods approved by the State conservationist and CPTAD as meeting the identified training requirement. The State conservationist, in consultation with the Director, CPTAD, may grant approval for course equivalency in lieu of any required State or national NRCS training course.
 - (iii) Training provided by an NRCS-approved certifying organization may be substituted for NRCS training.
 - (iv) CNMP planner designation candidates must complete the following national training requirements:
 - “Conservation Planning: Part 1” (AgLearn) or equivalent.
 - “Conservation Planning: Part 2” offered nationally or by the State.
 - CNMP planner designation candidates must provide two completed CNMPs for review and approval that will meet all criteria in 190-GM-405, “Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans.”
 - “Introduction to the Field Office Technical Guide” (AgLearn).
 - The following “Water Quality Webinar” series modules (AgLearn):
 - Overview of Water Quality Resource Assessment
 - Nitrogen Management and Concerns
 - Phosphorous Management and Concerns.
 - “Nutrient Management Track 1, Part 1” (AgLearn).
 - “Environmental Evaluation” webinar series, modules 1 and 2.
 - Primer on NRCS Environmental Compliance
 - Documenting the Environmental Evaluation on the NRCS-CPA-52
 - Assessment tools training for Erosion and Nutrient Management specific to the planner’s location, (national, State or OJT).
 - Basic Soils and Web Soil Survey Training (national, State or OJT).
 - “CNMP Training” coordinated by the National Animal Manure Nutrient Management Team (NAMNMT) or equivalent State-level training.
 - (v) The combination of the following three online courses may be substituted for “CNMP Training” (coordinated by NAMNMT or State equivalent):
 - “NRCS Agricultural Waste Management Systems - A Primer” (AgLearn)
 - “NRCS Agricultural Waste Management Systems - Level 2” (AgLearn)
 - One of the “National Air Quality Site Assessment Tool” Webinars (dairy, swine or poultry) (S&T Training Library)
- (8) TSP National CNMP Planner Designation Requirements
- (i) TSPs will obtain the CNMP planner designation by completing requirements in section 409.10D(7) (iv) and (v).
 - (ii) TSP CNMP planner candidates must complete the “TSP Orientation and Conservation Planning” course in lieu of “Conservation Planning, Part 1.
 - (iv) TSP CNMP planner candidates must complete the following additional training:
 - State-specific training module for each State where the TSP will be developing CNMPs (TSP website)

- Additional training or licensing required by State laws or regulations in the State where work is being performed.

E. Maintaining Certification

- (1) State conservationist will determine the type and minimum hours of training necessary to maintain certification. 180-GM-409-409.10E(1) does not apply to TSPs. For national requirements for TSPs to maintain conservation planning certification, see 180-GM-409-Section 409.10E(3).
- (2) NRCS and TSP CNMP planners are responsible for maintaining their designations. Maintaining designation includes completing necessary training to maintain and update skills.
- (3) TSP National Requirements for Maintaining CNMP Planner Certification
 - (i) Each TSP CNMP planner designation must be reviewed at least once every 3 years by the State conservationist or designee in the TSP's resident State. The review will be based on CNMPs completed by the TSP in that State during the time period being reviewed.
 - (ii) If a TSP did not develop any CNMPs in the resident State during the review period, the State conservationist of the TSP's resident State, after consultation with the national TSP Program manager, will have the review completed by a State where the TSP did work during the review period. Refer to policy in 440-CPM-504-C-504.26B(2) for plan reviews outside of resident States.
 - (iii) If a TSP has not developed any CNMPs in the past 3 years, a new sample CNMP must be prepared for review.
 - (iv) The TSP must review the State-specific training module for each State in which they will be redesignated so they are aware of any updated information.

F. Quality Assurance

- (1) The State conservationist must include actions in the State quality assurance plan to ensure that the State reviews the CNMP certification program.
- (2) The State conservationist or designee must review and verify the technical adequacy of each CNMP planner designation, including TSPs, at least once every 3 years. If an individual fails to meet the qualifications or criteria established for the CNMP planner designation, the certifying organization, whether it is NRCS or an NRCS-approved certifying organization, must suspend the status. When the status is suspended, the individual may seek redesignation based on State-specific guidelines. Applicants must present proof of training when seeking recertification.
- (3) For each CNMP planner designation, the State conservationist or designee must review a sufficient number of that planner's CNMPs to find out whether the plans or designs are developed and carried out according to NRCS conservation practice standards, policy, and CNMP technical criteria.
- (4) NRCS quality assurance policy and guidance can be found in 450-GM-407, "Documentation, Certification, and Spot Checking."

409.11 Reserved for State Equivalent Course list

409.12 Reserved for State Planner Designations

409.13 Exhibit 1 – Sample Worksheet to Evaluate Conservation Plans Submitted as Part of Certified Conservation Planner Role Designation or Redesignation

Instructions for using this worksheet:

- When using this worksheet, review the indicated conservation plan components.
 - For each component, if the plan contains and thoroughly represents all of the listed information, where applicable, a rating of “Satisfactory” must be given for that component.
 - For each component, if there is applicable information missing from what has been listed, or the information is vague or unclear, a rating of “Unsatisfactory” must be given for that component.
 - For each component, if the information provided goes beyond what has been listed or shows an exceptional level of effort and understanding from the planner, a rating of “Exceeds Expectations” may be given.
 - The “Comments” section may be used to describe the reasons for the rating that was given for each component.

- When making the final assessment at the end of this worksheet, review the ratings that were given to each component.
 - If all components were rated as “Satisfactory,” then the conservation plan “meets” all of the conservation plan requirements.
 - If one or more of the components were rated as “Unsatisfactory,” then the conservation plan “does not meet” all of the requirements, and corrective or other further actions should be listed for the planner.
 - If one or more of the components were rated as “Exceeds Expectations” and none of the components were rated as “Unsatisfactory,” then the conservation plan “exceeds” all of the conservation plan requirements.
 - The reviewer may leave comments or followup actions for the conservation planner.

Conservation Planner: _____ Date: _____

Title of Conservation Plan: _____

Conservation Plan Component	Rating	Comments
	Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Exceeds Expectations	
<p>Identify Problems and Opportunities and Client Objectives</p> <p>Client information – the plan contains a record of discussions about the customer’s—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Problems, opportunities, and concerns associated with all natural resources associated with their land, operation, or both - Production and business goals - Desired future conditions for planning areas as compared to existing conditions - Financial constraints and willingness to accept risk. - Facilities and machinery - Managerial level - Commitment to conservation - Objectives <p>When reviewing the plan in the field and speaking with the customer, it is obvious that the above items have been discussed.</p>		

Conservation Plan Component	Rating	Comments
	Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Exceeds Expectations	
<p>Inventory Resources and Analyze Resource Data</p> <p>The plan contains basic operational information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identification of the client’s planning land units - A record of utilities, easements, and legal limitations associated with the property in question - The land’s relationship to the entire operation or watershed <p>Upon field review, it is apparent that the client understands how the above constraints affect their planning process.</p>		
<p>Resource inventories – the plan includes, where applicable, the appropriate technical worksheets for—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Soils information - Crop inventory - Pasture inventory - Rangeland inventory - Forest management inventory - Developed land inventory - Associated land inventory - Cultural resource and historic property inventory <p>Upon field review, it is clear that these inventories have been correctly and comprehensively completed, and discussed with the client.</p>		

Conservation Plan Component	Rating	Comments
	Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Exceeds Expectations	
<p>Benchmark data – the plan describes the type, extent, and location of—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Existing conservation and management practices - Identified resource concerns, including the appropriate analysis tools used - Human considerations - Special environmental concerns <p>Upon field review, it is obvious that the above items have been correctly and completely identified and discussed with the client.</p>		
<p>Formulate and Evaluate Alternatives</p> <p>The plan documents that—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The client has been provided with multiple feasible approaches to address their objectives and resource concerns - The client has been given information that compares short-term and long-term ecological, economic, and social outcomes of the available practice options <p>A field review reveals that all alternatives were appropriate and the client fully understood the advantages and disadvantages of each.</p>		

Conservation Plan Component	Rating	Comments
	Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Exceeds Expectations	
<p>Make Decisions and Implement Plan</p> <p>Record of client’s decisions – the plan contains—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A list of conservation practices and the planned amounts of each necessary to meet the planned level of treatment - A realistic schedule for implementation of chosen practices - Assistance notes (CPA-6) or other documentation of the objectives of, discussions with, and decisions made by the client 		
<p>Implementation Requirements – detailed information concerning the practices contained in the plan and made available to the client, including, where applicable—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Designs, drawings, or illustrations - Engineering notes - Preparation for implementation - Method or technique of implementation - Required equipment. - Materials specifications, both natural and man-made - Supporting practices - Operation & maintenance <p>Upon field review, it is clear that the client has understood and agreed to the above details.</p>		

Conservation Plan Component	Rating	Comments
	Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Exceeds Expectations	
<p>Maps – conservation plan maps, soils maps, topographic maps, and/or other appropriate resource maps are included with the plan. Upon field review, it is apparent that the client has received and understands the included maps. The maps accurately describe and depict conditions of the client’s circumstances.</p>		
<p>Determinations – the appropriate HELC and WC determinations have been documented, where applicable. When applicable, a field review reveals that the client understands the process and implications of HELC/WC determinations.</p>		
<p>Environmental documentation – the plan contains Form CPA-52, “Environmental Evaluation Worksheet,” and any other documents needed to meet the requirements of NEPA or other applicable environmental requirements, such as the Endangered Species Act. A field review shows the forms have been accurately and comprehensively completed.</p>		

Conservation Plan Component	Rating	Comments
	Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Exceeds Expectations	
RMS – the plan provides for the treatment of all identified SWAPAE+H resource concerns that meets or exceeds the planning criteria in the FOTG.		
Other Supporting Documentation – a field review reveals that additional written materials, photographs, audio, or video files are appropriate, relevant, and complement the plan. This includes documentation of applied conservation practices.		
Receipt for Services – plan documentation includes customer’s request for assistance, service provided, and offer of receipt to the customer		
Conservation District – information appropriate and relevant to the plan with regard to the conservation district, cooperator agreement, or other applicable documentation is included with the plan		
Format – the plan is organized in a well laid out, easily understood, and logically sequenced manner. Upon field review, it is apparent that the client is comfortable using and understands all materials they have been provided.		

Reviewer assessment:

This conservation plan

_____ does not meet _____ meets _____ exceeds

all of the conservation plan requirements for NRCS “certified conservation planner” role designation or redesignation. Further required actions, if any, are listed below.

Comments and/or further required actions, if applicable:

Signature:

Date:

Planner acknowledgement:

I have read and understand all elements, ratings, and results of this conservation plan review. The assessment has been explained to me by the reviewer, and I am aware of and understand any further actions that are required regarding this conservation plan submitted for “certified conservation planner” role designation or redesignation.

Comments:

Signature:

Date:

409.14 Exhibit 2 – Sample Worksheet to Evaluate Areawide Conservation Plans Submitted as Part of Master Conservation Planner Role Designation or Redesignation

Instructions for using this worksheet:

- When using this worksheet, review the indicated conservation plan components.
 - For each component, if the plan contains and thoroughly represents all of the listed information, where applicable, a rating of “Satisfactory” must be given for that component.
 - For each component, if there is applicable information missing from what has been listed, or if the information is vague or unclear, a rating of “Unsatisfactory” must be given for that component.
 - For each component, if the information provided goes beyond what has been listed or shows an exceptional level of effort and understanding from the planner, a rating of “Exceeds Expectations” may be given.
 - The “Comments” section may be used to describe the reasons for the rating that was given for each component.

- When making the final assessment at the end of this worksheet, review the ratings that were given to each component.
 - If all components were rated as “Satisfactory,” then the conservation plan “meets” all of the conservation plan requirements.
 - If one or more of the components were rated as “Unsatisfactory,” then the conservation plan “does not meet” all of the requirements, and corrective or other further actions should be listed for the planner.
 - If one or more of the components were rated as “Exceeds Expectations” and none of them were rated as “Unsatisfactory,” then the conservation plan “exceeds” all of the conservation plan requirements.
 - The reviewer may leave comments or followup actions for the conservation planner.

Conservation Planner: _____ Date: _____

Title of Areawide Conservation Plan: _____

Areawide Conservation Plan Component	Rating	Comments
	Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Exceeds Expectations	
<p>The planner utilized an interdisciplinary team for plan development. Relevant NRCS and/or non-NRCS technical specialists were regularly consulted throughout the planning process. When NRCS did not possess the appropriate technology or resources, applicable agencies, groups, or other entities were asked to participate in the planning process.</p>		
<p>The planner identified decision makers and stakeholders associated with the planning area by consulting NRCS past clients, nongovernment partner entities, conservation and water resource districts, and other Federal, State, Tribal, and local government agencies.</p> <p>Decision maker and stakeholder meetings and discussions are documented in assistance notes or other documentation. Relevant information about each entity and their role is recorded.</p>		

Conservation Plan Component	Rating	Comments
	Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Exceeds Expectations	
<p>Decision maker and stakeholder project objectives are documented, including desired future conditions for the planning area as compared to existing conditions. Relevant investigations of the planning area were conducted with stakeholders to identify problems and opportunities.</p>		
<p>NRCS resource priorities for the planning area were determined by utilizing the NRCS strategic plan, the Chief’s priorities, the State resource assessment (SRA), conservation districts’ long-range plans, local work groups’ priorities, watershed or basin management plans, and other local and State assessments.</p> <p>The plan documents communication of NRCS priorities to decision makers and stakeholders</p>		
<p>Factors that may hinder or limit plan development or implementation have been accounted for in the plan, including—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project financial constraints and possible funding sources - State, Tribal, territorial, and Federal laws, regulations, or mandates that currently affect or could affect existing operations 		

Conservation Plan Component	Rating	Comments
	Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Exceeds Expectations	
<p>Natural Resource Inventory:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The level of inventory detail has been tailored to the complexity of the resource setting and the identified problems, opportunities, and objectives - Appropriate inventories for each land use have been conducted - Benchmark conditions have been recorded, including resources; types, amounts, and timing of operations and activities; and effectiveness of existing management measures and practices in addressing resource concerns - Infrastructure, utilities, easements, legal constraints, and determinations have been documented - Stakeholders and decision makers have been encouraged to participate in resource inventory activities 		
<p>Resource Analysis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resources have been analyzed using the appropriate tools, methods, handbooks, and manuals - Cause-and-effect links have been established and resource concerns identified 		

Conservation Plan Component	Rating	Comments
	Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Exceeds Expectations	
<p>Formulating alternatives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conservation systems and other treatments that will address the objectives, problems and opportunities have been identified and documented, with both land treatment (structural and nonstructural) and preventative measures - Stakeholders have been actively involved in formulating alternatives - Each alternative’s effects on physical resources, social, and economic considerations have been quantified and expressed in monetary or qualitative terms - The short-term and long-term beneficial and adverse impacts of each alternative have been identified - Alternatives include measures to mitigate any potential ecological damages - NRCS programs, programs of other agencies, and other implementation and funding opportunities that may be available to implement alternatives have been identified 		

Conservation Plan Components	Rating	Comments
	Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Exceeds Expectations	
<p>Documenting alternatives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The CPA-52 is used to document environmental effects - Documentation and presentation of alternatives is in the same format as the benchmark conditions, is easy to understand, and contains— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A description of the resource setting • A description of the management system • A complete list of the type, amount, and timing of actions involved in the management system that may change as a result of the plan • Effects of the actions on the resources and human considerations • Impacts of each alternative in comparison to the benchmark 		
<p>Decision making:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public response has been solicited through prepared notices and public meetings - Stakeholders and decision makers have agreed on an implementation strategy and schedule, including funding programs or authorities to pursue 		

Conservation Plan Component	Rating	Comments
	Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Exceeds Expectations	
<p>Maps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appropriate resource maps and maps of benchmark and planned conditions are included with the plan - Stakeholders and decision makers have reviewed the maps and used them in the decision-making process. The maps accurately describe and depict conditions of the planning area 		
<p>Supporting documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appropriate designs, conservation practice specifications, estimated costs and conservation system descriptions have been included and provided to decision makers - Operation and maintenance agreements are included in the plan - Required permits have been listed - Land rights and treaty rights have been documented - Mitigation of lost environmental values has been detailed 		

Conservation Plan Component	Rating	Comments
	Unsatisfactory	
	Satisfactory Exceeds Expectations	
Format – the plan is organized in a well-laid-out, easily understood, and logically sequenced manner. Upon field review, it is apparent that the stakeholders and decision makers are comfortable using and understand all materials they have been provided.		

Reviewer assessment:

This areawide conservation plan

_____ does not meet _____ meets _____ exceeds

all of the areawide conservation plan requirements for NRCS “master certified conservation planner” role designation or redesignation. Further required actions, if any, are listed below.

Comments and/or further required actions, if applicable:

Signature:

Date:

Planner acknowledgement:

I have read and understand all elements, ratings, and results of this conservation plan review. The assessment has been explained to me by the reviewer, and I am aware of and understand any further actions that are required regarding this areawide conservation plan submitted for “master certified conservation planner” role designation or redesignation.

Comments:

Signature:

Date:
