

## **Part 409 – Conservation Planning Policy**

### **IN409.0 General**

A. [NRCS Conservation Planning Policy, General Manual \(GM\) 180-CPA, \(Part 409\)](#), requires NRCS State Conservationists to ensure conservation planners meet minimum NRCS requirements. This supplemental policy covers assistance provided by Indiana NRCS employees and our conservation partners, Soil and Water Conservation Districts and Indiana State Department of Agriculture. Additional partner agencies may be considered under this policy as needed.

B. The purpose of this policy is to establish the approval process for Indiana as a supplement to the national [Conservation Planning Policy located in the General Manual 180-CPA, Amendment 19 \(Part 409\)](#).

### **IN409.3 Requirements for Providing Conservation Planning Assistance**

A (6). Indiana NRCS employees who have conservation planning as a major duty contained in their position description must achieve the Certified Conservation Planner designation; Indiana NRCS employees who assist Certified Conservation Planners with portions of the planning process or a specific suite of practices must achieve the Apprentice Conservation Planner designation; Indiana partners may achieve any planner designation at their discretion, or as required by specific agreement with NRCS or other requirement.

D. The Indiana State Conservationist delegates the role of designating certified planner roles in the national conservation planning database to the Indiana State Resource Conservationist and staff.

### **IN409.4 Planning on Units That Cross a State, County, or Field Office Boundary**

A. NRCS assistance on an individual planning area that crosses a county or field office boundary is the responsibility of the field office where the majority of the land is administered for USDA business, unless otherwise agreed to by the client. When planning needs cross state boundaries, the planner will notify the Indiana Area Conservationist and the Indiana State Resource Conservationist, who will then coordinate with the other states and agencies as needed.

### **IN409.5 Documentation of Conservation Planning Data and Signature Requirements**

D. See Indiana 409.5 Exhibit 1 for details on Indiana requirements for Conservation Planning Documentation.

E. Plan documents and supporting materials provided to the customer should be noted in the case file.

F. Plan Signatures

(1) Electronic (typed or e-authenticated token certification) signatures of the certified planner are authorized in Indiana.

(2) Electronic (typed or e-authenticated token certification) signatures of the client are authorized in Indiana, or acceptance of the conservation system alternative by the decisionmaker may also be documented in the Assistance Notes. Other associated customers may sign if requested by the decisionmaker or as required by specific program policy.

(3) The Indiana county Soil and Water Conservation District Board must be given the opportunity to review and approve all NRCS-developed conservation plans. Electronic (typed or

e-authenticated token certification) signatures of the conservation district are authorized in Indiana, or acceptance of the conservation system alternative by the conservation district may also be documented in the Assistance Notes or District Board Meeting minutes.

### **IN409.9 Criteria to Achieve an NRCS Conservation Planner Role Designation**

All NRCS employees and partnership employees seeking to be an Indiana NRCS *Certified Conservation Planner* will meet the minimum requirements as outlined for the ‘Certified Conservation Planner’ role, as described under the Conservation Planner Designation Curricula, and included in 180-GM, Part 409.9D3(ii). In special cases the State Conservationist may choose to waive the Indiana minimum requirements.

#### **C. Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities**

(3) The following additional knowledge, skills, and abilities are required for all conservation planning roles in Indiana

- Apprentice Conservation Planners - Ability to independently identify resource concerns on common land uses in their work area.
- Certified Conservation Planners - Ability to independently identify resource concerns on all land uses in Indiana.
- Both Apprentice and Certified Conservation Planners will be able to do the following:
  - Ability to recognize and collect the field data needed to adequately assess potential resource concerns
  - Knowledge of the Indiana Planning Criteria related to each resource concern.
  - Knowledge of Indiana Field Office Technical Guide standards and specifications, and Indiana Tools.
  - Ability to formulate alternative systems of practices to address resource concerns to Planning Criteria within the producer’s abilities and objectives.
  - Ability to satisfy all Special Environmental Concerns/NEPA-related issues using Indiana processes and tools.
  - Ability to use agency and Indiana NRCS Business Tools:
    - Current Planning Software
    - Current Reporting Software
    - Current Mapping Software
    - Soil survey tools
    - Approved erosion prediction technology
    - Other applicable site vulnerability assessment tools, as appropriate.

#### **D. Conservation Planner Role Designation Requirements**

(2) The Indiana State Conservationist delegates the role of designating certified planner roles to the Indiana State Resource Conservationist, based on the recommendation by the appropriate Indiana NRCS Area Conservationist and Resource Management Specialist that each employee has attained all necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities and has completed all required training.

The Indiana State Conservationist delegates the role of evaluating each certified planner candidate’s successful completion of Conservation Planning Course Part 3 – Module 9 to the Area Conservationist and their staff.

(3) NRCS employees who have conservation planning as a duty in their position description, or partner employees independently assisting customers through the nine-step conservation planning process and developing Resource Management System or progressive conservation plans will be designated as one of the following three roles.

(i) Apprentice Conservation Planner

- Indiana NRCS employees whose position descriptions or duties include conservation planning as a secondary requirement will achieve the role of Indiana Apprentice Conservation Planner (e.g. – Soil Conservation Technicians).
- Indiana partner employees who complete portions of the conservation planning process may achieve the role of Indiana Apprentice Conservation Planner at their discretion unless otherwise required by the Indiana State Conservationist or their supervisor to assist NRCS in specific capacities.
- Apprentice Conservation Planners will achieve Ecological Sciences Job Approval Authority for the most-commonly used practices and classes in their Indiana work area as determined by the appropriate NRCS Area Conservationist.
- Employees pursuing the Apprentice Conservation Planner role will work with their supervisor and NRCS area staff to achieve the role designation within 3 years of their effective date of employment in that position.

(ii) Certified Conservation Planner

- Indiana NRCS employees whose position descriptions or duties include conservation planning as a primary requirement, or who will serve in an acting capacity for such positions, or who will evaluate and recommend that individuals meet the requirements of the Indiana Conservation Planning Part 3 (Module 9) for certification will achieve the role of Indiana Certified Conservation Planner (e.g.– District Conservationists, Soil Conservationists, Resource Management Specialists, and other area staff as appropriate).
- Indiana partner employees who conduct the conservation planning process may achieve the role of Indiana Certified Conservation Planner at the discretion of the employee and their supervisor, unless otherwise required by the Indiana State Conservationist to assist NRCS in specific capacities.
- Indiana NRCS employees required to achieve the role of Certified Conservation Planner will do so within 2 years of their effective date of employment in that position, to the extent practical.
- Indiana certified planners must have two or more years of experience applying the NRCS Conservation Planning process, or have attended Conservation Boot Camp, and reached a proficiency to “work independently” as demonstrated through on the job training (OJT), quality assurance reviews, or other, and as

## Title 180 – General Manual IN Part 409

recommended for certification by the appropriate Indiana NRCS Area Conservationist and their area staff, and concurred by the State Resource Conservationist and validated via the Indiana Certified Planners Evaluation.

- Certified Conservation Planners will achieve Ecological Sciences Job Approval Authority (ESJAA) consistent with the requirements for Apprentice Conservation Planners. In addition, Certified Conservation Planners will achieve ESJAA for practices and classes promoted in Indiana (through Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA), Farm Bill Financial Assistance Programs and Initiatives, as well as partner-led conservation efforts), as determined by the Indiana Leadership Team.
- Certified planners from other states must have reached a proficiency to “work independently” in Indiana as demonstrated through on the job training (OJT), quality assurance reviews, or other, and as recommended for certification by the appropriate Indiana NRCS Area Conservationist and their area staff, and concurred by the State Resource Conservationist and validated via the Indiana Certified Planners Evaluation.

### (iv) Technical Specialist Planner

- Indiana NRCS employees whose position descriptions or duties include activities consistent with those identified for the Technical Specialist role in national policy will work to achieve this designation in Indiana.
- Technical Specialist Planners in Indiana will complete the training requirements as outlined in the national policy *with the exception that they will not be required to complete “Conservation Planning Course, Part 3”*.

### (11) Employees seeking one or more planner roles in Indiana will:

1. Notify their direct supervisor and appropriate NRCS Area Conservationist of the role they are required to achieve, and/or higher role.
2. The appropriate Area Conservationist will notify the State Resource Conservationist and Training Officer accordingly.
3. The Training Officer will assign the role-appropriate curricula to the employee’s AgLearn profile.
  - (a) Note: the supervisor/employee will need to manually add their preferred “Working Effectively With” training to their curricula. A complete list of courses that meet these criteria can be found in the Conservation Planner Designation Curricula.
4. The employee will complete and document required training in AgLearn.
  - (a) Partner employees will have an identified supervisor added to their AgLearn account to serve as ‘supervisor’ for the purposes of documenting training progress and completion.

Title 180 – General Manual IN Part 409

5. The supervisor and/or Training Officer will concur and document the completed training in AgLearn and notify the Area Conservationist and State Resource Conservationist.
  - (a) If documentation of completion of prior training cannot be found or regenerated, the supervisor and Area Conservationist may approve completion based on the employee's knowledge, skills, and abilities of the training subject.
6. The State Resource Conservationist will update the National Conservation Planner Database accordingly and notify the Training Officer to assign the role-appropriate curricula to the employee's AgLearn profile, as appropriate.

See IN409.11 for list of Indiana state course offerings approved as equivalent courses.

(12) TSP National Conservation Planner Requirements

- (i) TSPs obtain either apprentice conservation planner or certified conservation planner designations by completing the requirements in 180-GM-409-409.9D9(12).
  - TSP candidates seeking one or more of the planner roles must be accompanied to the field by a NRCS Certified or Master Certified conservation planner to meet with the plan decision maker. The field-reviewed conservation plan will be submitted to the Indiana State Resource Conservationist, along with a letter from the review to acknowledge the recommendation for certification.
  - TSP Apprentice Conservation Planner candidates must complete one (1) field-reviewed RMS plan for a conservation management unit with a minimum of two land uses.

E. Maintaining Conservation Planner Role Designations

(2) The State Conservationist delegates the responsibility to review each planner's designation to the appropriate NRCS Area Conservationist and their staff in consultation with the employee's direct supervisor as appropriate.

(3) Planner work to be reviewed will include records (plans) produced by the planner, either in conjunction with quality control and/or quality assurance activities conducted in the state, or as part of ongoing on the job training and assistance, or as otherwise deemed appropriate by the NRCS Area Conservationist and their staff.

(6)(i) Of the 40 contact hours required by national policy, Indiana continuing education requirements will include a minimum of:

1. Ten (10) hours in soil health/agronomy;
2. Five (5) hours in cultural resources and other special environmental concerns –  
NOTE: these hours are in addition to cultural resources certification requirements (NRCS General Manual Title 420, Part 401)
3. Five (5) hours in forestry management;
4. Five (5) hours in wildlife management;
5. Five (5) hours in pasture management.

Indiana will require planners to obtain their 40 contact hours in these subject areas to help ensure they maintain a comprehensive skillset to assess and treat a variety of natural resource issues.

(180-409-GM, IN Supplement Amendment 43, April 2019)

See 180-GM-409-409.9E(6)() Figure 409-1: ‘Conversion of Other Units of Credit to Contact Hours’ for details on what activities can be credited toward continuing education contact hours.

(7)(ii) The State Resource Conservationist will be the designated person to authorize the approval of courses, credit, and other methods of earning credit towards planner role recertification.

**IN409.10 Criteria to Achieve an NRCS Comprehensive Nutrient Management Planner Designation**

D. Certification Requirements

(2) Indiana NRCS employees who will be developing and/or approving comprehensive nutrient management plans (CNMP) must achieve the NRCS CNMP Designation. At a minimum, the Area Resource Management Specialists (RMS) and at least one employee per Conservation Delivery Team (CDT) service area will be certified to write, review, and approve CNMPs in Indiana. It is the Area Conservationist’s responsibility, in consultation with the State Resource Conservationist, to ensure this minimum requirement is met.

(6) The State Resource Conservationist will be the designated person to maintain the national conservation planner database with these designations.

(7) Training

(iv) Indiana NRCS Comprehensive Nutrient Management Planners must complete all national requirements with the following additions and exception:

- Achieve the *Certified Conservation Planner Role*
- Submit one CNMP plan for review/approval to the State Conservation Agronomist.
- An NRCS employee who is a Certified Crop Adviser (CCA), meets the “Nutrient Management Track 1, Part 1” (AgLearn) requirement

E. Maintaining Certification

IN409.10E.(1) Details of the national requirements for TSPs to maintain conservation planning certification can be found under 180-GM-409-Section 409.10E(3).

**IN409.11 Reserved for State Equivalent Course List**

Indiana has been approved for the following state provided courses to serve as equivalents to the nationally required courses:

Required Course and ID	Approved Equivalent Course and ID	Approved for Past Delivery, Future Delivery or Both
Soil Health and Sustainability Training, NRCS-NEEDC-000050	Indiana’s 3-day Soil Health Course	Both
Conservation Planning Course: Part 2 – Modules 6-8, NRCS-NEEDC-000164	Indiana’s Certified Planners Evaluation	Both

(180-409-GM, IN Supplement Amendment 43, April 2019)

Indiana 409.5 Exhibit 1– CONSERVATION PLANNING DOCUMENTATION

This policy pertains to conservation planning only and does not supersede any requirements as outlined by specific USDA programs, Food Security Act compliance, or engineering policy.

1. **The official NRCS planning case file is the client’s electronic folder.** Hard copy case files may be maintained but are not required for conservation planning documents. Both hard copy and electronic copies are not required.

If information pertaining to the client’s plan are stored in a location outside of the client’s electronic record, whether hard copy or electronic copy, they will be referenced in the Assistance Notes as to their location and filename.

Items contained in the “Producer Version” sections below will be provided to the producer for their records. Items contained in the “Case File Documentation” sections below are the minimum documentation items required in the client’s file.

2. Each client serviced by NRCS Indiana employees (District Conservationists, Conservation Delivery Team employees, etc.) will receive the following six documentation items and minimal requirements:

<b>1. Schedule of Implementation (Conservation Plan)</b>	
<b>Producer Version:</b>	Conservation Plan document printed from current approved planning software
<b>Case File Documentation:</b>	National Planning and Agreements Database (NPAD) <i><b>Practice Schedule</b></i> <sup>1/</sup>
<b>Signatures</b> <sup>2/</sup> :	NRCS Certified Conservation Planner’s Signature = required <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Wet’ or electronic (/s/) signature, <i><b>or</b></i></li> <li>• Assistance Note of when the plan was approved by the NRCS or partner Certified Conservation Planner.</li> </ul>
	Decision-maker’s acceptance of the plan = required <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Wet’ or electronic (/s/) signature with the decision-maker’s name, <i><b>or</b></i></li> <li>• Assistance Note of when the plan was reviewed with and agreed to by the Decision-maker.</li> </ul>
	SWCD Representative’s Signature <sup>2/ &amp; 3/</sup>

<b>2. Environmental Evaluation (IN-NRCS-CPA-52)</b>	
<b>Producer Version:</b>	Not Applicable
<b>Case File Documentation:</b>	Electronic version of the IN-NRCS-CPA-52 <sup>4/</sup>
<b>Signatures:</b>	Block P (individual certified to complete the evaluation) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Electronic (/s/) signature with the typed signatory's name</li> </ul>
	Block S (individual designated as the Responsible Federal Official) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Electronic (/s/) signature with the typed signatory's name</li> </ul>
<b>3. Installation Documents/Specifications (Job Sheets)</b>	
<b>Producer Version:</b>	Job Sheet hard copy document.
<b>Case File Documentation:</b>	Assistance Note of when the specifications and O & M documents were delivered to the client <b>and</b> reference to an electronic version of the specification applicable to the client
<b>Signatures:</b>	Job Sheets <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None</li> </ul>
<b>4. Assistance Notes</b>	
<b>Producer Version:</b>	Not Applicable
<b>Case File Documentation:</b>	Electronic version of all pertinent correspondence involving the client <b>and</b> references to planning documents and signature dates.
<b>Signatures:</b>	Not Applicable
<b>5. Plan Map</b>	
<b>Producer Version:</b>	Plan Map (pdf)
<b>Case File Documentation:</b>	<b>Practice Schedule</b> with site-specific practices digitized and geo-referenced.
<b>Signatures:</b>	Not Applicable
<b>6. Soils Information</b>	
<b>Producer Version:</b>	Not Required unless requested
<b>Case File Documentation:</b>	Geospatial and tabular information retrieved through planning software <sup>5/</sup>
<b>Signatures:</b>	Not Applicable

<sup>1/</sup>: the official NRCS plan is one or more NPAD **Practice Schedules**. Documents created using NRCS planning software are not required to be filed in the client's file.

<sup>2/</sup>: An electronic signature, either with an e-authentication token certification, or **denoted as /s/**, or specific reference to when the plan was accepted in the Assistance Notes will carry the same weight as a 'wet' signature for NRCS Indiana planning purposes.

<sup>3/</sup>: NRCS plans will continue to be shared with the local SWCD Board to ensure that local conservation needs are being met and are supporting local business plans and other local priorities. Acceptance of the plans by the Board may also be documented in the District Board Meeting minutes.

<sup>4/</sup>: the official NRCS case file is the client's folder in the agency approved electronic storage system. Supporting documents related to the client's plan that are not stored electronically in NPAD or the Document Management System will have their location referenced in the Assistance Notes.

<sup>5/</sup>: The minimum required soils information is the geospatial and tabular data available through NRCS GIS applications. Soil map legends are not required.