

## **Part 417 – Ecological Sciences Job Approval Authority**

### **417.0 Purpose**

The purpose of the ecological sciences job approval authority (ESJAA) process is to ensure the competency of NRCS employees and partner employees to plan, design, and install ecological science (ES) conservation practices.

### **417.1 Background**

A. Conservation practices have the potential to affect the environment, natural resources, and public health and safety. Depending on the size, location, and complexity of the work, failure of a conservation practice could cause environmental damage, unacceptable economic risk, significant property damage, health impairment, and even loss of life.

B. The ESJAA process ensures the competency of NRCS employees and partner employees to plan, design, and install conservation practices that, with proper operation and maintenance, will perform the intended functions for the projected service life. ESJAA additionally serves to substantiate and maintain the credibility and trust of NRCS with State boards of licensure, accrediting organizations, other agencies, units of government, and the public. ESJAA policy does not apply to technical service providers (TSPs).

C. For the purpose of this policy, an ES conservation practice is any conservation practice included in Title 450, National Handbook of Conservation Practices (NHCP), that has an ES discipline as the lead or co-lead with the Conservation Engineering Division and does not require engineering job approval authority. This definition also applies to all similar interim conservation practices. The State resource conservationist (SRC) or other identified position with ES conservation practice oversight (e.g., Assistant State Conservationist for Technology) has responsibility for leading implementation of ESJAA for ES conservation practices within their State.

D. A qualified person who has appropriate ESJAA may plan, design, supervise the installation of, and certify completion of the conservation practice. While others may assist with planning, design, or installation of a conservation practice, accomplishment of each phase of the work requires the oversight and approval of a person with appropriate ESJAA.

E. The ESJAA process is designed to ensure technical assistance will result in practices which—

- (1) Address the identified resource concerns.
- (2) Comply with NRCS standards, technical criteria, and policies.
- (3) Function as planned to address the requirements of site-specific concerns.
- (4) Provide cost-effective solutions with consideration given to installation, operation, and maintenance costs.

### **417.2 Definitions**

A. Ecological Sciences Job Approval Authority (ESJAA).—The certification granted to an individual who has demonstrated the appropriate knowledge, skill, and abilities to plan, design, and certify installation of a given ES conservation practice.

B. Job Class.—Subdivision within ESJAA for conservation practices based on controlling factors of scale, complexity, or risk.

C. Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs).—Competencies required for ESJAA to plan, design, install, and certify the conservation practice according to the requirements of the conservation practice standard.

D. Controlling Factors.—Elements which describe the scale, complexity, or hazard potential associated with a given practice.

E. Practice Phase.—ESJAA generally applies to three practice phases:

- (1) Inventory and evaluation (I&E) planning
- (2) Design and development of conservation practice requirements
- (3) Installation oversight and certification

Note: States have the option to further subdivide these three practice phases into different groupings.

### **417.3 Responsibilities**

A. National Headquarters (NHQ)

- (1) The Director, Ecological Sciences Division (ESD), will—
  - (i) Develop policy and procedures for granting ESJAA.
  - (ii) Establish and maintain the national database template for States to manage ESJAA for their personnel.
  - (iii) Identify and document the recommended minimum KSAs and ESJAA controlling factors for each conservation practice to be located in the national ESJAA database.
  - (iv) Review and concur with each State's ESJAA process and structure.
  - (v) Conduct regular quality assurance (QA) reviews of the ESJAA.
- (2) National technology support centers (NTSCs) will—
  - (i) Provide technical support to States to implement ESJAA and provide training and updates for related conservation practices and systems.
  - (ii) Integrate ESJAA duties with technology development and transfer.

B. Regional Conservationists will—

- (1) Ensure consistent application of agency policies and procedures concerning development and approval of ESJAA.
- (2) Serve as a conduit of information from States to national leadership regarding broad policy issues and concerns regarding ESJAA.

C. State Conservationists and the Directors, Pacific Islands and Caribbean Areas, will—

- (1) Review and concur with the ESJAA technical criteria developed by the SRC prior to submission to the director of ESD.
- (2) Ensure the SRC develops policy and procedures for—
  - (i) Establishing the procedures within the State for providing ESJAA to employees and non-NRCS employees working as partners with NRCS.
  - (ii) Establishing procedures for reviewing and updating ESJAA controlling factors and job classes each time the State updates a conservation practice standard.
  - (iii) Ensuring supervisor review of individuals' ESJAA on a 3-year cycle, or more often if necessary, to ensure planners are maintaining the technical competency and State and local licensure requirements commensurate with the ESJAA certification level.

- (iv) Identifying the State technical discipline lead for each ES conservation practice standard.
  - (v) Establishing appropriate level of ESJAA for conservation practices associated with certifications such as certified conservation planners, comprehensive nutrient management planners, nutrient management planners, or integrated pest management planners.
  - (3) Work with NTSC technical discipline leads, national technical discipline leads, and the National Conservation Practice Standard Subcommittee as appropriate to address State-level issues related to ESJAA.
  - (4) Be responsible for the development, quality control, coordination, delegation of authority, use, and maintenance of ESJAA in their State. This responsibility includes ensuring that all technical staff have the opportunity to acquire the required ESJAA for their work area, and operate within their assigned authorities.
  - (5) Ensure ESJAA is assigned to NRCS employees and partner employees providing technical assistance with NRCS based upon the appropriate training, experience, and demonstrated competence.
  - (6) Establish a process for reducing or removing ESJAA.
- D. Conservationists with supervisory responsibilities will—
- (1) Ensure that appropriate technical employees who have appropriate ESJAA to plan, design, or install and certify conservation practices maintain their ESJAA for conservation practices necessary for addressing local resource concerns.
  - (2) Identify training, experience acquisition, or other means needed to obtain and maintain the ESJAA of field office staff.
  - (3) Request assistance from specialists at the area or State level, as appropriate, when pending tasks exceed the ESJAA of field office staff.
- E. All NRCS technical employees will—
- (1) Maintain a copy of their record of ESJAA (report from an approved ESJAA database) and maintain their skill levels for the conservation practices for which they have ESJAA.
  - (2) Request training needed to obtain or maintain ESJAA for conservation practices necessary for addressing local resource concerns.
- F. Partner employees, acting under the technical supervision of an NRCS employee and providing technical assistance in partnership with NRCS, must be evaluated and assigned an appropriate ESJAA on the same basis as NRCS employees when such authority does not conflict with State, Tribal, or local law. ESJAA policy does not apply to TSPs.

#### **417.4 Delegating Ecological Sciences Job Approval Authority**

- A. The SRC or equivalent State technical lead is delegated authority for establishing criteria, maintaining database, and conducting quality assurance on the State's process for granting ESJAA.
- B. The SRC may delegate the authority to area or State specialists to approve ESJAA for NRCS and partner employees.
- C. The immediate supervisor or a manager one level above must concur with ESJAA for NRCS and partner employees.

D. Before undertaking any actions to grant ESJAA to partner employees, NRCS must obtain written verification that the recipient has the partner organization's permission to pursue ESJAA.

E. An NRCS employee may not delegate ESJAA greater than his or her own authority.

F. Some conservation practices may be regulated by Federal, State, Tribal, or local governments (e.g., pest management, comprehensive nutrient management, prescribed burning). Such regulations may require the submission of plans for review and approval by a certified specialist, regardless of his or her ESJAA status, for conservation practices that constitute a regulated action.

#### **417.5 Classes and Phases for Ecological Sciences Job Approval Authority**

A. Conservation Practice Job Classes.—States may use up to five classes of ESJAA for ES conservation practices. Up to five job classes may be used for a conservation practice based on size, hazard, or complexity, although one job class may be sufficient for simple conservation practices. Although the national ESJAA database lists nationally suggested job classes by conservation practice controlling factors, States may adjust these based on State-specific conditions.

- (1) The national ESJAA database displays conservation practices that utilize controlling factors. The listed values for the controlling factors are maximums; therefore, SRCs may specify lower controlling factor values than those listed. SRCs will grant ESJAA according to the job classes established for the State in the State ESJAA database.
- (2) States may add additional controlling factors in the ESJAA database as needed within a State where failure of an implemented conservation practice can negatively impact the environment in areas such as water and air quality, soil stability, wildlife or human health, or may cause economic risk.
- (3) The SRC, or his or her designee, assigns ESJAA based on each individual's KSAs derived from training, experience, and applied competence. The SRC needs only assign ESJAA for conservation practices applicable to the geographic area the individual serves.
- (4) When approving interim ES conservation practices, the ESD director will assign recommended JAA controlling factors. The SRC will assign the appropriate ESJAA to individuals within the State for the interim ES conservation practice.

B. ESJAA consists of three phases:

- (1) I&E and conservation practice planning
- (2) Design and development of the conservation practice requirements.
- (3) Installation oversight and certification—confirmation that the practice is installed according to the conservation practice standard and certification of practice completion.

#### **417.6 Ecological Sciences Job Approval Authority Review**

A. No more than one level of review is required to determine technical competency for ESJAA assignment or quality control.

B. Conduct ESJAA reviews concurrently with annual 5-percent spot checks, conservation planning certification reviews, and field office QA reviews to minimize the workload for the

field offices. The SRC will develop the procedures to ensure that an individual's ESJAA accurately reflects postreview findings.

#### **417.7 Job Approval Authority for Additional Work, and Associated Plans and Specifications**

The determination of ESJAA for an ES conservation practice extends to related additional work, such as repair, modification, rehabilitation, or removal.

#### **417.8 National ESJAA Database**

A. Although States must use the national ESJAA database to document and maintain the ESJAA for ES conservation practices, they may continue to use State-developed databases that have a data structure compatible with CDSI.

B. ESJAA database can be downloaded from the [NRCS State, Field, and Technical Staff SharePoint](#) page at

[https://usdagcc.sharepoint.com/sites/nrcs/intranet/SitePages/Ecological\\_Sciences\\_Job\\_Approval\\_Authority.aspx](https://usdagcc.sharepoint.com/sites/nrcs/intranet/SitePages/Ecological_Sciences_Job_Approval_Authority.aspx)