

What is a Conservation Plan? A conservation plan is a plan developed by the owner or manager of an agricultural operation that addresses the protection, restoration and stewardship of five natural resources. The natural resources considered are soil, water, animals, plants and air. The conservation planning process, carried out by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) personnel and the landowner, is a basic problem-solving process. NRCS assembles the collection of site specific planning documents, maps, diagrams, assorted records and worksheets into a Conservation Plan Folder. This material constitutes the farmer/rancher's plan and it provides a record of management objectives, resource considerations, problem identification, management decisions, maintenance and improvement of natural resources on your farm.

Plans can either be a Resource Management System (RMS) or progressive. A conservation plan that addresses all of the identified natural resource problems on an operation is called a Resource Management System (RMS) plan. The degradation of the soil, water, animals, plants and air must be comprehensively addressed in an RMS plan. A progressive plan is developed when the client is ready, willing and able to make and implement some, but not all, of the decisions necessary to achieve an RMS level plan. The rate of progress in moving to an RMS level plan will depend on the client's desires and constraints.

The Louisiana Master Farmer Program requires an agricultural producer to have an RMS plan fully implemented before being certified as a Master Farmer. This plan is considered to be implemented when an NRCS conservationist determines that all essential practices selected to treat the identified problems have been applied on the selected property. With that, all federal, state and local resource requirements must be achieved. The RMS plan may not include all property on the farm or operation. Only areas that are identified and plans developed and implemented for those areas will be considered to be in full compliance. Documentation that each resource concern was considered is included in the plan. An environmental evaluation that addresses National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) considerations is developed and is also part of the documentation in the plan folder.

The conservation planning process used by NRCS helps land owners to fully understand resource needs and management requirements to achieve conservation production and profitability goals. The success of conservation planning and implementation depends on the voluntary participation of land owners and managers with NRCS conservationists.

NRCS conservation planning uses a basic nine-step process:

- 1. Identify Concerns, Opportunities or Problems** – The landowner or manager initiates the planning process by requesting assistance for or participating in a program that requires a conservation plan. An objective such as a desire to improve grazing management or a problem such as an area with gully erosion may be the reason to start the planning process. To plan to an RMS level, NRCS will help the producer to evaluate each resource concern. All concerns, opportunities and problems will be identified and documented for the landowner during this step.
- 2. Determine Objectives** – The producer usually has an objective when requesting assistance for a plan. Objectives and goals, however, are more clearly and comprehensively developed as an RMS plan is discussed. The objectives are the producer's, not NRCS's, and are documented in the plan folder.
- 3. Inventory Resources** – As the objectives are formulated for conservation, production and profitability, a detailed inventory of resource conditions is carried out. Aerial photographs, soil maps, field trips, diagrams and a good set of notes are used to record the existing conditions and features of the property. Historic land use and past and present natural resource conditions, along with other important characteristics of the farm or ranch, are documented in the plan folder. Soils, forage species in each pasture, animal numbers, crops grown, historic production levels, condition of stands, location of roads, drainage ditches and canals, fences, bridges, power and water lines, wells and other important landscape features are recorded during this step.

4. **Analyze Resource Data** – Following the inventory, an analysis of the data is conducted with the producer to identify, quantify, indicate and address resource problems. New problems or opportunities may be identified during this step. Objectives can be revised or enhanced. Soil capabilities or suitabilities are important to understand at this point because they will affect all future management decisions. Soil characteristics may indicate other forages or crops that are more suitable for a site.
5. **Formulate Alternatives** – Alternative solutions, methods and plans are addressed and reviewed that can help the producer achieve his/her objectives. The objectives that were set earlier are considered. Planned changes in current practices such as methods of cultivation, irrigation and planting or methods of grazing are addressed here. This is generally done by the NRCS conservationist for the producer.
6. **Evaluate Alternatives** – Producers with NRCS evaluate the proposed alternatives for action to determine which one best meets their specific objectives while solving the identified resource problems. The positive and negative aspects including costs of proposed plan implementation are considered. Long- and short-term impacts and benefits should be considered here. An economic analysis of the cost and return of alternatives may be completed by the NRCS conservationist to help the producer make more informed decisions.
7. **Make Decisions** – The producer makes the final decisions on a planned course of action. When all the decisions have been made, the plan is written up and plan maps with planned features are developed. Technical specifications of all planned practices are reviewed with producer by the NRCS conservationist. A logical sequence of practice installation is established. The planning portion of the conservation plan development is basically completed.
8. **Implement the Plan** – The landowner or operator now puts the plan into action. Practices are installed according to a time schedule and according to the technical specifications of each practice. As provided by NRCS, management methods that were planned, agreed to and documented in the plan narratives are followed. Technical assistance is provided by NRCS when requested by the producer to assist with proper installation of practices, management techniques and to certify installed practices. The landowner should document practices completed in his/her copy of the plan.

9. **Evaluate the Plan** – NRCS helps the landowner evaluate results of practices installed to ensure purposes and objectives were achieved. As resource conditions or land use changes, technology advances occur or enterprises change objectives, the conservation plan will be revised and changed accordingly. An up-to-date, comprehensive conservation plan is the basis for most financial assistance conservation programs.

How Does An RMS Plan Differ from a Conservation Program Contract? An RMS plan is simply an organized documentation of resource inventory information and planned actions, that, when implemented, will offer adequate protection to the natural resource base, assuring sustained productivity. The decision maker for the development of an RMS plan can be an individual, group or other entity that has the authority by ownership, position, delegation or otherwise to decide on a course of action. The RMS plan itself is voluntary and does not legally obligate the client to a binding agreement.

USDA offers various conservation programs that provide financial assistance to help with implementation of conservation practices that may be included in the RMS plan. If the client wishes to participate in a USDA financial assistance program voluntarily, the RMS plan is used to develop a Contract Support Document. The Contract Support Document contains information that provides a detailed description of the client's and USDA's responsibilities for the implementation of conservation practices or BMPs specified in the RMS plan when government financial assistance will be provided. A conservation program contract is the formal agreement that legally binds all parties involved to specific responsibilities and obligations. The decision-making process where a conservation program contract is involved must include the landowner who will be required to sign the contract. Once the client signs the contract, he has agreed to all of the conditions contained in it and has legally obligated himself or his representative to meet the specified requirements for the duration of the contract period.

A client's involvement in the development and implementation of a conservation plan is voluntary, and the technical assistance required can be obtained without charge from NRCS. Participation in USDA financial assistance programs that can provide federal cost-sharing assistance to install planned conservation practices requires entering into a legally binding contractual agreement with USDA.