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The UPDATE

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service - North Carolina

A cooperative partnership with local Soil and Water Conservation Districts and North Carolina Division of Soil and Water

For more information about this publication, or to contribute or to request copies, please contact Stuart Lee at Stuart.Lee@nc.usda.gov.

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Notes from the State Conservationist

Our staff, contract employees, partners, students and volunteers that deliver Farm Bill Conservation Programs work persistently. Your level of commitment is inspiring, and far too often leadership overlooks communicating how proud and humbled we are by the dedication that you devote to administering and delivering conservation technical and financial assistance to North Carolina.

Every day we are asked to do more, give more, meet deadlines, and all with less support. While we are all under this pressure it seems effortless to voice concern when things go wrong -- while singing our appreciation for your hard work far too often goes numbly silent.

Right now, I want you all to know; employees, contract employees, partners, students and volunteers, you are valued. You are important and you make a difference to NRCS, North Carolina and to our customers.

As we roll closer to the end of a successful 2014 Fiscal Year, our accomplishments were cemented through your strengths. In the coming year, we will be looking at options to add field staff, improve program delivery, increase technical training opportunities, and create more consistencies.

I ask for your continued dedication and to always feel comfortable providing suggestions, comments and ideas to me or to anyone on our State Leadership Team.

Again, thank you for your hard work.

Most Sincerely,

Timothy Beard
NRCS State Conservationist



Technical and Financial Assistance Conservation Programs Update

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Program Staff is currently obligating funds for approved Farm Bill conservation program applications. The following information is an overview of our current allocations.

North Carolina Current Allocation

EQIP General FA	\$17,365,208.00
FY14 Certified Organic	\$65,275.00
FY14 Organic Transition	\$27,228.02
FY14 On-Farm Energy	\$540,300.03

Golden Wing Warbler WLFW	\$42,650.00
Crop	\$2,592,618.00
Pasture	\$1,306,171.00
Confined Animal	\$4,595,627.00
Forestry	\$669,983.78
EQIP Long Leaf Pine	\$972,310.00
Ag Chemical Mixing Facility	\$60,425.00
Agricultural Secondary	
Containment Facility	\$38,383.00
Closure of Waste Impoundments	\$83,000.00
Irrigation Efficiency Microirrigation	\$116,848.91
Irrigation Efficiency Center	
Pivot Conversion	\$77,049.00
National Water Quality Initiative	\$1,094,000.00
Western NC Stream Initiative	\$2,259,641.00
Seasonal High Tunnels	\$118,220.00
Associated Ag Lands	\$48,904.00

Strikeforce High Tunnel	\$333,705.00
Strikeforce Forestry	\$424,094.00

Total 2014 Request: \$52,468,731

Total 2014 Applications Recieved: 3,497

Agricultural Conservation Enhancement Program (ACEP)

With just over \$1.6 million available for easement enrollments through the 2014 ACEP, North Carolina expects to enroll over 800 acres between both the Wetland Reserve and Agricultural Land Easement components of the program.

Working Together

Job Approval Authority and Certified Conservation Planner

A few years ago the partnership, consisting of NRCS, NC Division of Soil and Water, NC Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and the NC Conservation Districts Employee Association, worked together to draft a North Carolina Conservation Partnership Five Year Strategic Plan. This draft plan helps pave a pathway for the partnership to move forward in our joint efforts to meet expectations of customers, leverage resources, improve efficiencies, and prepare for the future.

With the draft North Carolina Conservation Partnership Five Year Strategic Plan being the “big picture” of where we are heading, there are many pieces that we must address along this journey. One of those pieces is to increase the number of employees with Job Approval Authority (JAA) and the number of Certified Conservation Planners (CCP).

Recently, a State Conservation Action Team – consisting of team members from each of the partner organizations, met to develop an Action Plan to address challenges and establish a consistent process for all partnership staff to obtain JAA and CCP in order to improve the delivery of technical services at the field level (Action Plan Mission).

The Action Plan has three identified goals to help the partnership achieve the mission of the Action Plan.

Action Plan Goals

- Establish a greater number of employees with JAA.
- Increase the number of CCPs.
- Enhance local technical capacity and service delivery at the local level.

There are challenges along the way, such as establishing clear guidance and expectations for obtaining and maintaining JAA and for becoming a CCP; developing an accessible web-based tool to track and submit requests; building value in both JAA and CCP; and establishing a reliable training system.

There will be other hurdles to cross, but the team is committed to the Action Plan and helping the partnership to build and complete the “big picture”.

As always, NRCS appreciates your feedback. If you have questions or input that would like to share with NRCS, please send those to Matt Flint at Matt.Flint@nc.usda.gov.

Guiding Principles for Draft Five Year Strategic Plan

- **Effective leadership** at all levels is essential.
- **Conservation planning** is the fundamental principle for the overall soil and water conservation program.
- A **highly trained and competent workforce** is required for effective and efficient delivery of services.
- **Excellent and seamless service** to all customers is an expectation.
- **Full engagement and cooperation** by the entire partnership in the implementation of the plan will be critical to success.

State Conservation Action Team

NCCDEA – Mike Doxey, Rick McSwain, Michael Pardue, Edward Davis

NCASWCD – Dick Fowler

NRCS – Tim Beard, Jerry Raynor, Matt Flint, Robert Horton, Terri Ruch, Stuart Lee

DSWC – Pat Harris, David Williams, Julie Henshaw, Natalie Woolard, Kelly Ibrahim

HIGHLY ERODIBLE LANDS



USDA NRCS is reminding producers that changes mandated through the 2014 Farm Bill require them to have a Highly Erodible Land Conservation and Wetland Conservation Certification (AD-1026) on file. The Farm Bill relinked highly erodible land conservation and wetland conservation compliance with eligibility for premium support paid under the federal crop insurance program. The Risk Management Agency, through the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation (FCIC), manages the federal crop insurance program that provides the modern farm safety net for American farmers and ranchers.

“It’s important that farmers and ranchers taking the right steps to conserve valuable farm and natural resources have completed AD-1026 forms on file at their local Farm Service Agency office,” said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack in a recent news release. “This will ensure they remain eligible for crop insurance support.”

For farmers to be eligible for premium support on their federal crop insurance, a completed and signed AD-1026 form must be on file with the Farm Service Agency (FSA). Since many FSA and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs have this requirement, most producers should already have an AD-1026 on file. If producers have not filed, they must do so by June 1, 2015.

USDA will publish a rule later this year that will provide details outlining the connection of conservation compliance with crop insurance premium support. Producers can also contact their local USDA Service Center for information.

It is important to note:

- The USDA still considers a producer eligible until NRCS reports non-compliance to FSA and then FSA determines the person to be ineligible.
- NRCS anticipates that a producer’s eligibility files already maintained by FSA to control producer eligibility for USDA program payments are likely to be updated with features that support eligibility for crop insurance subsidies.

Highly Erodible Land Conservation (HELC) and Wetland Conservation (WC) provisions aim to reduce soil loss on erosion-prone lands and to protect wetlands for the multiple benefits they provide.

HELC and WC provisions apply to all land that is considered highly erodible or a wetland, and that is owned or farmed by persons voluntarily participating in USDA programs unless USDA determines an exemption applies.

- A producer who wants to verify his or her compliance status should submit a request to FSA. When a farmer completes the AD-1026, FSA and NRCS staff will outline any additional actions that may be required for compliance with the provisions.
- A producer who wants technical assistance to update, revise, or develop a conservation compliance plan should submit a request to NRCS.
- A producer is not going to be out of compliance if they are currently following an approved conservation compliance plan, or are currently implementing a conservation system that provides sufficient erosion protection to meet the compliance requirements.

For more information on conservation compliance, highly erodible land, wetlands and determinations, visit North Carolina NRCS on the Web at www.nc.nrcs.usda.gov.

What is Highly Erodible Land

Highly erodible land is any land that can erode at excessive rates because of its soil properties. Highly erodible land is designated by field and based on the proportion of the total field acreage that contains highly erodible soils.

Producers who produce agricultural commodities on land identified as highly erodible are required to farm such land in accordance with a conservation plan or system that is approved by NRCS and that substantially reduces soil loss. Producers proposing to produce agricultural commodities on highly erodible land that has no crop history prior to Dec. 23, 1985, (known as Sodbusting) are required to farm such land in accordance with a conservation plan or system that provides for no substantial increase in soil erosion.

A conservation plan or system to reduce soil erosion is not required for land that is not highly erodible.

What is Wetland

A wetland is an area that:

- Has a predominance of hydric soils (wet soils);
- Is inundated or saturated by surface or groundwater (hydrology) at a frequency and duration sufficient to support a prevalence of hydrophytic (water tolerant) vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions, and
- Under normal circumstances supports a prevalence of such vegetation.

NRCS and FSA Roles in Making Determinations

When making HELC and WC compliance determinations:

- NRCS responsibilities include:

For HELC compliance:

- Making highly erodible land determinations;
- Working with producers to develop conservation plans and systems; and
- When required, determining if highly erodible land is being farmed in accordance with a conservation plan or system approved by NRCS.

For WC compliance:

- Making wetland determinations, including establishing if certain technical exemptions apply, such as prior converted cropland;
- Determining if a wetland conversion has occurred.

- FSA makes eligibility determinations, such as who is ineligible based upon NRCS technical determinations of HELC or WC non-compliance. FSA also acts on requests for the application of certain eligibility exemptions, such as the good faith relief exemption.

CSP Quick Facts:

- The Conservation Stewardship Program is geared toward private farmers, ranchers and forest landowners who are already using conservation measures – and want to take those efforts to the next level.
- This voluntary program encourages producers to maintain and improve conservation activities already in place while undertaking additional conservation activities.
- CSP provides many conservation benefits, including improved water and soil quality, enhanced wildlife habitat and conservation activities that address the effects of climate change.
- The inaugural participants of the Conservation Stewardship Program can apply to renew their contracts until September 12 to participate for another five years in the program.



The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is offered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service and is the Farm Bill program that helps farmers and ranchers take conservation investments to the next level.

The first participants (fiscal year 2009) of the Conservation Stewardship Program have until September 12, 2014 to renew their contracts and make decisions on additional conservation activities that will benefit priority natural resource issues.

About 20,000 CSP contracts are reaching the end of their initial five-year contract period and may be renewed for an additional five years where participants agree to take additional conservation measures.

The program provides opportunities for farmers and ranchers who are already established conservation stewards, helping them improve water quality, soil health and wildlife habitat.

“CSP farmers are conservation leaders and go the extra mile to conserve our nation’s resources,” NRCS Assistant State Conservationist Greg Walker said. “The 2014 Farm Bill continued that strong commitment and heightened the program’s focus on generating conservation benefits.”

Since CSP began in 2009, more than 58 million acres have been enrolled in the program – an area the size of Indiana and Wisconsin combined. CSP participants boost their operations’ conservation benefits by installing new conservation activities that make positive changes in soil, water, air and wildlife habitat.

“This program allows landowners to reach the next level of conservation and opens the door to trying new conservation activities,” Walker said.

For more information on CSP, please contact your local USDA Service Center or visit NRCS on the Web at www.nc.nrcs.usda.gov.

National

- More than 20,000 CSP Contracts are reaching the end of their initial five-year contract period and may be eligible for renewal.
- Since 2010, more than 58 million acres have been enrolled in the program.

North Carolina

- 160 CSP Contracts are reaching the end of their initial five-year contract period and may be eligible for renewal.
- Since 2010, more than 169,000 acres have been enrolled in the program.

Landowners

In the Spotlight



Mrs. Chou Yang - Hmong farmer in Catawba

Mr. and Mrs. Yang - Breaking Barriers

As is common with immigrant farmers, language barriers can create a wall. For Catawba County Hmong husband and wife farmers, Chou Yang (husband) and Chou Yang (wife), their desires for natural resource conservation were stronger than language differences. The Yang family sought Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Farm Bill conservation program participation to help them in their land stewardship efforts.

With the invaluable translation assistance of Der Xiong, Immigrant Agriculture Agent for Catawba County, Mr. and Mrs. Yang became interested in, and received, NRCS technical and financial assistance for conservation planning and Seasonal High Tunnel Systems. Today, their cut flower farm operation in Claremont, NC, is actively utilizing technical conservation management assistance

and a Seasonal High Tunnel system. The Seasonal High Tunnel System, along with improved natural resource management, will allow them to increase farm profit by having flowers earlier and later in the year, and will help sustain Catawba County's valuable resources. The USDA Service Center in Catawba County is very proud of the partnership with Mr. and Mrs. Chou Yang and their efforts to spread the conservation partnership message and opportunities throughout the Hmong community.

Mr. Lyvance Lowry - The Apple Never Falls Too Far from the Tree

The Lowry family is a known leader in Robeson County, the Native American community, and they are respected among their peers for their more than 50 years of leadership in farming. The Lowry farm is a 600 acre generational farm that took a management shift in 1963 when Lycurous Lowry took the helm. Under his leadership, the farm expanded and has become a "center of excellence" for the farming community, providing a source to learn about progressive agricultural management practices.

The farm is now entering into a new era of excellence as Lyvance Lowry, Lycurous' son, takes the helm.

During his leadership, Lyvance has added 20 poultry houses, expanded conservation efforts to include forced air composters, and sustained natural resource conservation practices, such as a no-till conservation system. He has also expanded the operational structure to include raising and training race horses. Like his father, Lyvance is a leader in the industry, being named poultry "Producer of the Year" three times.

When asked why farm and be a leader, Lyvance states, "I just love doing it, I don't know anything else but farming and taking this farm even further."



Lyvance and Lycurous Lowry



In Great Demand

USDA's new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) drew an overwhelming response from partners across the nation. Of the almost 600 pre-proposals submitted from across the country in July, about 230 were invited this week to continue the process by submitting full proposals by October 2, 2014.

"This USDA program provides an entirely new approach to conservation at this scale," said Jason Weller, chief of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. "RCPP offers a unique opportunity to harness innovation and welcome new partners into the conservation mission. The program puts our partners in the driver's seat, allowing them to find creative solutions to the conservation issues in their areas."

RCPP provides a way for private companies, tribes, local communities and non-government partners to collaborate and invest in cleaner water and air, healthier soil and enhanced wildlife habitat. It will enable USDA to partner with third parties or work directly with producers in watersheds and other critical conservation areas to leverage private sector funding to maximize conservation investments.

Applicants from across the nation applied to the program, requesting more than six times the \$394 million in available funding. Partners identified the resources they would bring to the table in order to leverage USDA's investment. Weller said nearly 5,000 partners came together in the pre-proposal phase. By mid-July, partners had submitted pre-proposals for rigorous evaluation, including 201 for projects related to eight previously-designated critical conservation areas, 60 for multi-state and national-level projects, and 278 for state-level projects, two of which coming out of North Carolina.

North Carolina NRCS reviewed and submitted six RCPP pre-proposals for consideration at National Headquarters.

"The amount of pre-proposals from North Carolina and across the nation show a like-minded determination to better the quality of our lands and their ecosystems," said North Carolina State Conservationist Tim Beard.

With overwhelming national responses, NRCS Headquarters staff rigorously reviewed the nationally submitted pre-proposals, ranking them based on their innovation, partnership capacity and ability to leverage non-federal resources and get conservation on the ground. After the National Ranking, North Carolina is pleased to announce that two of the six proposals have been invited to submit full RCPP proposals, and North Carolina is included in several regional (multi-state) projects.

For more information on RCPP please visit us on the web at www.nc.nrcs.usda.gov.



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