



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

Framework for the Future of Wildlife



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Introduction

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has a strong foundation on which to build sound wildlife enhancement efforts now and into the 21st century. For more than 60 years, the agency has been working with farmers, ranchers, and other land managers through the Nation's 3,000 soil and water conservation districts to improve wildlife habitat. Through the agency's reorganization, additional responsibilities brought by the last three farm bills, and the potential for new partnerships, NRCS has more opportunities to expand and improve its efforts to protect and conserve wildlife.

With such opportunities in mind, the Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment and the Chief of NRCS convened a 10-member NRCS Wildlife Scoping Team. More than 20 organizations of wildlife and farm-related interest were invited to a 2-day workshop at the Patuxent Wildlife Visitors Center near Laurel, Maryland. Questionnaires were sent to those unable to attend. This meeting and others, along with input from the questionnaires, resulted in the vision for wildlife set forth in the goals and recommendations of this report.

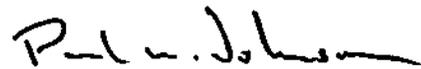


Foreword

Wildlife is one of America's most treasured natural resources. Nearly 80 percent of this Nation's wildlife habitat is interspersed over privately owned landscapes. For over 60 years, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly the Soil Conservation Service) has worked through 3,000 soil and water conservation districts and other partners to assist landowners and managers with natural resource problems and opportunities, including those associated with wildlife habitat management.

With the increased interest in wildlife, by private landowners and the general public, and new opportunities in the last three Farm Bills from Congress, I asked a team to "scope out" our wildlife needs. This report is a product of that effort and sets forth a framework for the future. I have already moved to implement one recommendation in the report by creating a Wildlife Habitat Management Institute to elevate this agency's concern for wildlife.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service looks forward to its major role in wildlife habitat planning and management on private lands in America.



Paul Johnson
Chief
Natural Resources Conservation Service



Goal 1

Fully implement agency policy, in regard to wildlife conservation and opportunities, to assure that wildlife considerations are an integral part of natural resource conservation planning.

Background

Wildlife planning must be an integral feature of the agency's overall planning concept. Adequate policy exists, but wildlife as a significant planning concern has not been adequately translated into action.

Recommendation

Incorporate wildlife conservation as a priority into all NRCS planning decisions at all levels through the Field Office Technical Guide.

Goal 2

Expand the roles of wildlife and aquatic biologists in the NRCS planning process with emphasis on training and “on-site” delivery to ensure quality technical assistance.

Background

Since its creation in 1935, the agency has hired biologists to provide expertise in fish and wildlife habitat management. Biologists provide input from this discipline to internal policies and directives, and training to NRCS staffs. They also provide direct technical assistance to landowners during conservation planning and application activities.

Need and demand for biological expertise have increased with expanded program responsibilities, while the available number of well-trained biologists has declined. Educated in general ecological and environmental subjects, NRCS biologists have been assigned numerous additional duties in work areas such as National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance, water quality, Environmental Impact Statements development, and other environmental duties. Especially demanding of NRCS biologists' time have been the Conservation Reserve Program and Swampbuster. The Wetlands Reserve and Emergency Wetlands Reserve programs and Soil, Water, Air, Plants, and Animals (SWAPA) policies have placed additional demands on the limited number of NRCS biologists. Wetland issues often dominate NRCS biologists' time through field reviews and delineation processes.

Since the NRCS reorganization, biological assistance has become more diffused. Clear channels of communication do not exist for obtaining the assistance and training needed from biologists. As additional ecological and environmental concerns emerge as priority issues, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the NRCS biologists to carry out their assigned responsibilities. Clear channels are needed for obtaining timely technical assistance and training at the field level.

Recommendations

The importance of addressing wildlife issues during the planning process should be emphasized through Regional and State Conservationists. This emphasis would reinforce the idea that wildlife habitat is as important in conservation planning as other resources. Emphasis by the Chief and other key National Headquarters staff should reinforce the wildlife responsibilities and, especially, opportunities resulting from the new Farm Bill.

- Clearly define the biologist's role at the State, area, and field levels. This could reduce the number of collateral duties biologists now perform. It may be determined that additional staff specialists should be hired or that some collateral duties can be eliminated.
- Create a Wildlife Habitat Management Institute. The institute would function as a liaison between NRCS and universities for technical development as well as provide technical support for wildlife habitat at all levels. The institute would also work with other institutes, agencies, and volunteers to address issues and develop new ideas and concepts related to terrestrial and aquatic habitat management on private lands.
- Develop memorandums of agreement and interagency personnel agreements (IPAs) with State and Federal wildlife agencies and private partners. These technical professionals could be assigned to areas and selected field offices, as needed, to provide biological technical support to the field. Missouri and several other States are currently doing this. Conversely, NRCS personnel could be detailed to State fish and game agencies.
- Develop regional oversight committees composed of the State biologists in each of those regions. These committees would function as an oversight review group for biological issues in their region. Ad-hoc committees should be formed to review technical references, maintain technical accuracy and consistency, and address other issues as needed. An elected chairperson would represent the region at national meetings. This would require strong support from Regional and State Conservationists to ensure biologists would have time and funding to carry out the responsibilities associated with this concept.
- Provide for NRCS managers, such as State Conservationists, Assistant State Conservationists, and State Resource Conservationists, to have periodic training in executive responsibilities in technical

disciplines. These courses or executive sessions would include such items as the national biology policy, NEPA policy, and Farm Bill changes.

- Initiate a nationwide analysis of current numbers of permanent, full-time staff in each discipline. Then compare to strategic plans, the Farm Bill, SWAPA policy, NEPA policy, and so forth. This would result in a realignment of numbers of full-time employees needed in the future as NRCS shifts away from structural engineering measures and single practice applications toward watershed-wide natural resources conservation planning and management. Over time, the numbers of biologists, range conservationists, and other such technical specialists would increase while total staffing numbers would remain the same.
- Create an NRCS national job skills file to find NRCS personnel who have been biologists or have biology/wildlife degrees and are now in other job series. These people could be used for technical assistance on a part-time basis.
- Require basic biology/ecology training for all new NRCS employees who have planning responsibilities and who have not received formal training in this field.
- Maintain the position series 486 biologist when hiring biologists whose duties include wildlife habitat management. Many of the State biologists are currently in the 401 series. This is a general biology series and academic core requirements are not as rigid as those in the 486 series.
- Have the Information Resources Management staff create technical discipline pages within the NRCS Home Page on the World Wide Web. Each discipline should be connected by an internal network so that a field office could submit a question to a discipline page and get answers back from any specialist in the country.
- Specifically addressing the issue of responsibilities for technical assistance, there needs to be a designated person or a focal point of contact for all technical assistance provided in each State. Institutes, centers for excellence, and regional technical teams should go through this focal point of contact to provide advice and technical assistance to the field offices. Only in this way can we ensure a coordinated approach to delivering technical support to the field.

Goal 3

Establish a marketing and training component in plans to assure availability of expertise and management commitment to incorporate wildlife components into overall NRCS planning.

Background

NRCS has a long and proud history of working with landowners and managers to develop and implement conservation plans on the Nation's farms and ranches. The focus of much of those conservation efforts has been to prevent soil erosion. At the same time, however, the "10 steps" of conservation planning necessitated at least a basic level of Resource Management System (RMS) planning by land unit that included all of the other natural resource needs, including wildlife.

With the advent of the 1985 Farm Bill, the agency's focus shifted to work with producers to develop compliance plans designed to reduce soil erosion rates. Wetland determinations were made in order to keep the producers in compliance with the "Swampbuster" provisions of the Farm Bill. While wildlife values of these efforts are known, this was a pronounced move away from the historical RMS planning approach that included wildlife. At the same time, the demographics of the agency workforce began to swing away from employees with a predominantly agrarian background to a workforce with diverse, sometimes more urban-based, backgrounds.

These factors, as well as others, present the agency with both the challenge and opportunity to increase the workforce's ability to integrate wildlife needs into conservation planning. Often conservationists who work on wildlife habitat projects or plan the landscape for wildlife do so because of their own interest or the interest of the particular land manager. Clearly, the field office workforce and the support staff would benefit from increased training in working with farmers and ranchers in both developing wildlife-friendly plans and in applying those plans on the ground. The key to successful planning is to work with landowners on what needs to be done on the entire farm or ranch and then follow up with on-the-ground assistance in implementation.

Recommendations

- Establish and fully support an NRCS "Boot Camp" where all new employees who have planning responsibilities have an intensive month-long indoctrination into how NRCS conducts resource inventories and develops conservation plans. At the "Boot Camps," they would gain intensive hands-on experience with the application of important regional conservation practices. Training locations and teaching cadres should be permanent.
- With the agencies and partners, conduct new and on-going training that fully integrates wildlife needs into planning. Make teaching slots for partners a routine element of training courses offered by NRCS. Encourage partners to use NRCS instructors in their wildlife training. Take a regional approach to training.

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- Learn different teaching techniques and approaches from our partners and other groups with similar interests. Opportunities exist to work and learn from other government agencies, non-profit groups, professional societies, schools, and universities.
 - Reward employees who gain professional certification with wildlife-associated societies. Examples could include: sponsoring their memberships, spot awards, or some other form of recognition.
 - Develop adjunct professorships between NRCS employees and local community colleges and universities. The objective would be to market conservation while providing valuable wisdom and perspective to the pool of potential new employees.
 - Use sabbatical leave approaches where some period of time (3 to 12 months) every 7 years whereby a field employee is detailed or otherwise allowed to work in another State or county to gain new perspectives and ideas that can be incorporated on return to their work area.
 - Make co-sponsorship of meetings and conferences related to wildlife routine. Make sure that information exchange is made available in a timely manner.
 - Provide training funds that are intended solely for wildlife training purposes.
 - Establish a formal NRCS mentoring process to allow sharing of knowledge, skills, and abilities among individuals within the agency.
 - Use wildlife habitat programs as challenge grant/cost-share opportunities with current and potential partners.
 - Make the Internet and training on the use of the Internet available and functional in each office in order to utilize wildlife-oriented information on the NRCS Home Page and to access a myriad of other pages with similar information. Create links with other conservation groups to facilitate trust with NRCS technical assistance and people.
 - Sponsor producer field days, game feeds, and workshops that highlight successful landowner experiences. Encourage industry-related businesses to participate in the field days.
 - Increase information campaigns to recognize good wildlife work that is being done on private lands.
 - Initiate and facilitate a vigorous information exchange among partnership groups. Institutes are a possible mechanism as are videos, brochures, and newsletters.

Goal 4

Use partnerships for delivery and enhancement of quality wildlife planning assistance to our customers.

Background

NRCS is recognized as the leader in providing technical assistance for natural resources planning on private lands. Many other agencies and organizations also have responsibility for providing wildlife-oriented assistance to private land users. This overlap in missions provides many opportunities to develop and use partnerships to incorporate high quality wildlife planning assistance into NRCS planning activities. Benefits to both NRCS and our partners include more efficient accomplishment of common missions and effective transfer of technology between partnerships to incorporate high quality wildlife planning assistance into conservation activities. Benefits to NRCS include increased availability of wildlife assistance, especially at the field level, and expanded access to technology, data bases, and information with little direct cost. Benefits to our partners include access to a well-developed technical assistance delivery system serving private lands and enhanced ability to integrate wildlife assistance into natural resource planning. Benefits to private land users include enhanced efficiency, consistent information, and less redundancy between programs and agencies.

Recommendations

- Establish a process within NRCS to actively develop and manage partnerships. This will involve taking initiatives to form partnerships, helping to define goals, and managing partnerships in order to gain the most benefit from them.
- Involve partners in NRCS training and meetings so they will learn more about us and our programs and we will learn more about their organizations. At these meetings, they will also contribute insights from their perspectives.
- Share technology and information with partners. This could include Geographic Information Systems (GIS), data bases, models, and resource inventories. For this to be successful, NRCS and its partners need to agree on common protocols and methods.
- Exchange staff with partners through IPAs or other methods.
- Use funding opportunities with partners to increase incentives for wildlife work on private lands. These could include innovative funding packages with segments sponsored by various partners.
- Use partnership agreements to fill specific needs. This could include training and assistance for specific species or regional issues and needs.

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- Ask partners to distribute in their newsletters the message that wildlife assistance is available from NRCS.
 - Bring partners in early when developing policies and rules in order to get their input built into the process. This will avoid giving the impression that they are being asked to buy into something that is already set. It will also help avoid contradictory policies, regulations, and programs.
 - Encourage and fully support networking between NRCS and partners for the formal and informal exchange of information and ideas, including presenting technical papers and serving in leadership roles of professional organizations.
 - Work with partners to develop and share localized training packages.
 - Join with partners to recognize private land users who accomplish good wildlife habitat development and management.
 - Ensure that partners are involved in the development of wildlife standards in the Field Office Technical Guide.
 - Use State technical committees to aid the development of joint long-range conservation goals which encourage enhancement of wildlife habitat and management.
 - Work with partners to ensure that the latest wildlife information and technology reaches private land users.



What Our Partners Have To Say

During the course of the scoping effort, the team sought answers to six questions from our partners. Participants were divided into three facilitated groups of seven to eight people. Questionnaires were also sent to those organizations that indicated an interest in participating. The following answers, recommendations, and actions are a compilation of the three groups' responses and the questionnaire responses.

Question 1: In your opinion what must be done to encourage private landowners to integrate fish and wildlife values into decision making? List barriers and actions needed.

1. There is a lack of understanding of wildlife habitat requirements among landowners. Generally, landowners are not able to assess the effect of their actions on wildlife.

Actions —Through education efforts, increase landowners' understanding of wildlife management.

- Provide planning models of good wildlife habitat so landowners can do their own plans.
- Make better use of landowner association meetings to educate landowners.
- Work with more groups of landowners rather than with individuals (area-wide planning).
- Encourage the use of outside assistance for follow-up.

2. Economics is a major consideration. Landowners need reasons to justify wildlife as a part of farm/ranch plans. Land is viewed as a commodity. Some practices are seen as liabilities, not as assets. Some landowners see losses of crops by wildlife depredation.

Actions —Promote stewardship ethic of wildlife/economic compatibility.

- Increase awareness of potential economic returns.
- Give property tax relief for wildlife habitat development.
- Explore ways to solve the problem of restrictive liability insurance costs.

3. Farmer/landowners are busy and need to have information about wildlife habitat development made readily available.

Actions —Use other agency involvement and other indirect means to offer information.

- Use bankers, real estate agents, equipment dealers, and others to help provide information on habitat development.
- Make information available where contacts are made and other assistance is sought such as Farm Service Agency (FSA), Cooperative Extension, State wildlife agencies, Farm Bureau, and others.

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4. NRCS staff is inadequately trained in biology and too few in number to respond effectively to wildlife management needs on private lands.

Actions —Use other partners to enhance NRCS skills and delivery of technical assistance.

- Use State technical committees to work with partnerships in organizing delivery of technical assistance.
- Use “train the trainer” concepts.

5. A lack of trust and good will among agencies, partners, and landowners prevents effective working relationships.

Actions —Use an interdisciplinary approach.

- Fully utilize State technical committees by forming sub-committees to work together on special projects or other needs for wildlife.
- Conduct joint efforts such as workshops, game feeds, field days, and other activities that build trust.

6. Many landowners do not want to become “involved.” They fear loss of property rights and permit hassles at Federal, State, and local levels. They are also concerned about the safety of people on their land.

Actions —Reinforce landowner-friendly approach by training on how to work with landowners.

- Provide incentives to landowners.
- Develop safe-harbor concepts. (Involves working with landowners on endangered species rather than an all-regulatory approach.)

7. Misperceptions of how landowners care for the land foster mistrust. Some landowners feel that there is a general lack of understanding and recognition of what is already being done to benefit wildlife.

Actions —Involve landowners in workshops and conferences to share success stories.

- Promote media exposure for doing a good job for wildlife.
- Give awards and recognition to deserving landowners.
- Involve State fish and game agencies.

Question 2: In your role, what are the opportunities for partnerships or collaboration to help NRCS provide quality technical assistance?

- Share employees through details and IPAs.
- Recruit new partners not only from the agricultural sector but also from corporations and industry.
- Increase interagency networking through workshops and demonstration projects.
- Establish partnerships through funding agreements and donation of time and materials.
- Review frequently the list of potential partners.
- Nurture partnerships. All have different motives, resources, and objectives. They are dynamic and need to be results oriented.
- Ask partners to help get information into the agency's technical guide.
- Serve on State technical committees, which will engender field input from all agencies.
- Conduct region-specific technical meetings and retreats.
- Serve as a catalyst to foster attitude changes from regulatory to voluntary.

Question 3: What are the opportunities for joint training and marketing efforts?

- NRCS invites partners to its training sessions including farm bill programs related to wildlife. Use partners as trainers.
- Exchange information on each partner's program through training sessions and expositions.
- Promote interagency field days with producer groups.
- Develop videos, publications, brochures, news articles, and guest articles for annual reports for landowners and general public.
- Use the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) under formal agreements with partners.

Question 4: What are the opportunities for sharing and transferring technology?

The participants identified several things that agencies and organizations may have in common. These were: assessment tools, models, and evaluation procedures of wildlife habitat. Resource inventories, numerous data bases on wildlife, and GIS were also identified as technology in common. To share we must:

- Agree on protocol between agencies for sharing technology issues such as GIS and data base access.
- Improve directory of technology sources through the NRCS Home Page on the Internet.
- Share wildlife information sheets.
- Identify and use leaders in agricultural organizations including the agricultural press.
- Work with researchers. Share what works and what doesn't.
- Gain more exposure for NRCS through technical journals.

Question 5: Other recommendations to NRCS that will assist in delivering a wildlife program.

This question was intended to capture ideas that did not fall in previous categories.

- Make wildlife a clear management priority within the agency.
- Bring partners and landowners into the program early.
- Allow for maximum flexibility including regional and State variations.
- Work in partnership with landowner consulting firms.
- Capture the wildlife work being done through a reporting program designed to yield measurable results.
- Make wildlife a part of the land user's overall program plan.
- Promote the appreciation of a sustainable food supply provided by landowners.

Question 6: How will we as partners know we have succeeded in our efforts to promote wildlife values for this and future generations?

- There is a reverse in the loss of biodiversity.
- A positive attitude toward the importance of wildlife habitat occurs.
- Established goals have been reached.

Suggested methods of measuring results include:

- Set up ongoing partnership group to look at how NRCS can capture wildlife work through its reporting system.
- Measure partnership success by setting goals and evaluating if goals were met.
- Conduct public surveys to determine if there is:
 - a) Public recognition of NRCS being involved in wildlife planning on private lands.
 - b) Public recognition of private landowner wildlife efforts.
 - c) Landowner consideration of wildlife involved in all land use decisions.

Summary

The NRCS Wildlife Scoping Team reached consensus on the following:

- Although NRCS has historically provided wildlife planning assistance to private landowners, the ingrained concept within the planning process was that wildlife habitat was something that was left over after all other land uses were considered. Wildlife was, generally, secondary to considerations that produced clear economic contributions to the “bottom line.” If a landowner or planner or both were interested in and knowledgeable of wildlife needs, then considerably more was done for that resource.

With the advent of NEPA and other environmentally oriented legislation, NRCS biologists had less time to train field personnel at a time when wildlife training was most needed. Therefore, the group felt that a high priority should be placed on back-to-the-basics training that would provide NRCS conservationists with the knowledge to discuss comfortably and effectively with landowners the impact of practices on wildlife.

- Building trust among agencies, partners, and landowners emerged as a significant challenge for all parties. Landowners, generally, feel that the public neither understands nor appreciates the landowners’ relationship to the land, the need for a sustainable food supply, or the work already being done by private landowners in environmental matters, including wildlife. Furthermore, there is a strong feeling among landowners that government assistance might lead to further regulation and a loss of property rights. To ameliorate this, agencies must work toward building a rapport that will foster cooperation not only between agencies and partnership organizations but also with private landowners.
- Partnerships are dynamic and should be oriented to projects or results that have specific objectives. Depending upon long-term goals and objectives, different partnerships and capabilities should be sought often.

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