Management Initiatives

Management Initiatives:

Ensuring Civil Rights

NRCS employees ensure that every customer and every colleague is treated with fairness, equity, and respect. We strive for a workplace and society that are inclusive and respectful of differences.

Management Goal:
Establish an equal opportunity standard for excellence through a highly skilled workforce that is diverse at all levels and ensures a commitment of equal access to NRCS programs and services.

Equal Employment Opportunity

It is the policy of NRCS to achieve a culturally diverse workforce that provides services to a varied and changing population. A diverse workforce is one that reflects Department of Labor statistics on the makeup of the Nation's labor force and that values differences such as cultural background, race, color, age, sex, national origin, disability, religion, or marital status at all levels of the organization. Valuing diversity means recognizing that individuals are different and that diversity is an advantage if nurtured and well managed, and it means changing behavior and systems to nurture the richness of differences.
In order to achieve a diverse workforce, NRCS will:

- Create—through awareness training, career developmental opportunities, and managerial commitment—the workplace environment that makes NRCS the employer of choice for the best-qualified individuals of all backgrounds;
- Create a working environment that is free of discrimination and sexual harassment and that is accessible to individuals with disabilities; and
- Recognize, appreciate, and value diversity, thereby demonstrating trust, respect, and concern for the welfare of all people within the Agency.

Performance Expectation:
The Agency workforce will closely resemble the diversity of the Nation's labor force.

Fair and Equitable Service Delivery

NRCS is committed to providing equitable service to all customers, regardless of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, marital or family status, political beliefs, parental status, or protected genetic information.

To ensure fair and equitable program delivery, NRCS will:

- Conduct a continuous review of all Agency activities, including program requirements, to ensure that technical assistance and financial assistance are provided equitably;
- Recognize the multilingual and multicultural needs of our customers;
- Ensure that Agency information, tools, and technologies are in formats that can be used effectively

by minority, underserved, and nontraditional groups;

- Produce communications materials, such as multilingual publications, specifically targeted to reach underserved groups;
- Strengthen ties with academic institutions and community-based organizations that serve minorities to develop and deliver services to meet the needs of minority, underserved, and nontraditional customers;
- Cooperate with Tribal governments to implement strategies for delivering assistance that meets their needs;
- Develop innovative strategies using existing authorities to reach historically underserved landowners and land managers, and seek new authorities to broaden and strengthen the conservation partnership; and
- Conduct active outreach programs to inform all underserved groups of the availability of services.

Performance Expectation: Every NRCS office that provides services to customers will strive to provide parity in service delivery.

Improving Internal Management

Good management of internal business processes and Agency resources is essential to efficient program operations that provide high-quality customer service and make effective use of the public investment. NRCS is committed to fully implementing the management strategies that the President's Management Agenda has identified as key to improving the effectiveness and accountability of the Federal government as a whole. We have developed detailed long-range action plans to meet the criteria for excellence for each component of the President's agenda. Major tasks in these plans are included in the Agency's annual business plan and in annual operating plans at all levels. Implementation of these tasks will enable us to:

- Maintain an efficient, high-performing, diverse workforce, aligned with mission priorities and working cooperatively with our partners and the private sector;
- Make effective use of electronic information management systems to enable:
  - Employees to provide better service to customers;
  - Customers to easily access our information and use our planning tools to improve their management of soil and water resources; and
  - Customers and stakeholders to understand Agency processes and the rationale for Agency decisions.
- Improve financial management and avoid improper payments;
- Link budget decisions more closely with program performance to achieve greater conservation.

Human Capital

NRCS employees work with the employees of Federal, State, local, and Tribal agencies and organizations, as well as volunteers, non-profit organizations, and private sector technical service providers to deliver and carry out the Nation's conservation agenda on private land. At the field level, the workforce of the conservation delivery system includes as many non-Federal as Federal employees, although the Federal segment includes a higher proportion of technical specialists.

NRCS' primary assets are the knowledge, skills, and dedication of our employees. Our success depends upon our people's technical expertise and ability to work effectively with an increasingly diverse clientele. The core NRCS technical workforce must continue to possess technical expertise in a wide range of disciplines. Our need for leadership and management skills will increase as we work to bring a wider range of interests and partners together in science-based, interdisciplinary efforts to get conservation on the land. Maintaining excellence in the range of needed disciplines may be difficult in the next few years because a significant percentage of the NRCS workforce will be eligible to retire in 5 years. Sustaining a workforce that can achieve our mission will require continuous, aggressive attention to a multi-faceted human capital plan.

Management Goal:
Manage our human capital strategically to ensure the right skills in the right locations to deliver high-quality products and services.

To ensure our workforce is in the right locations and has the right skills, NRCS will:

- Provide training and development opportunities for current and new employees to maintain technical excellence in an environment of rapidly expanding knowledge and technology. Actions will include:
    - Requiring new employees to attend NRCS Boot Camp in their first year;
    - Requiring advanced management training for middle managers;
    - Establishing annual multi-level assessments to determine training needs at all levels of the Agency;
    - Reduce the time it takes to hire new employees;
    - Use targeted recruitment strategies and specialized hiring initiatives to attract qualified employees to address skills gaps identified in the Human Capital Plan;
    - Develop and implement plans for leadership recruitment, development, and succession that include specific objectives, actions, and timetables;
    - Develop a strategic workforce planning model for managers to assess and analyze their workforce, and ensure that managers have flexibility to organize operations for optimal service delivery.
    - Use programs, such as the Agricultural Conservation Enrollees/Seniors (ACES) project, to obtain the services of experienced workers on a temporary basis.
    - Strengthen the Earth Team volunteer program to expand NRCS services by using volunteer time, talent, and energy to help meet Agency needs.

Electronic Government

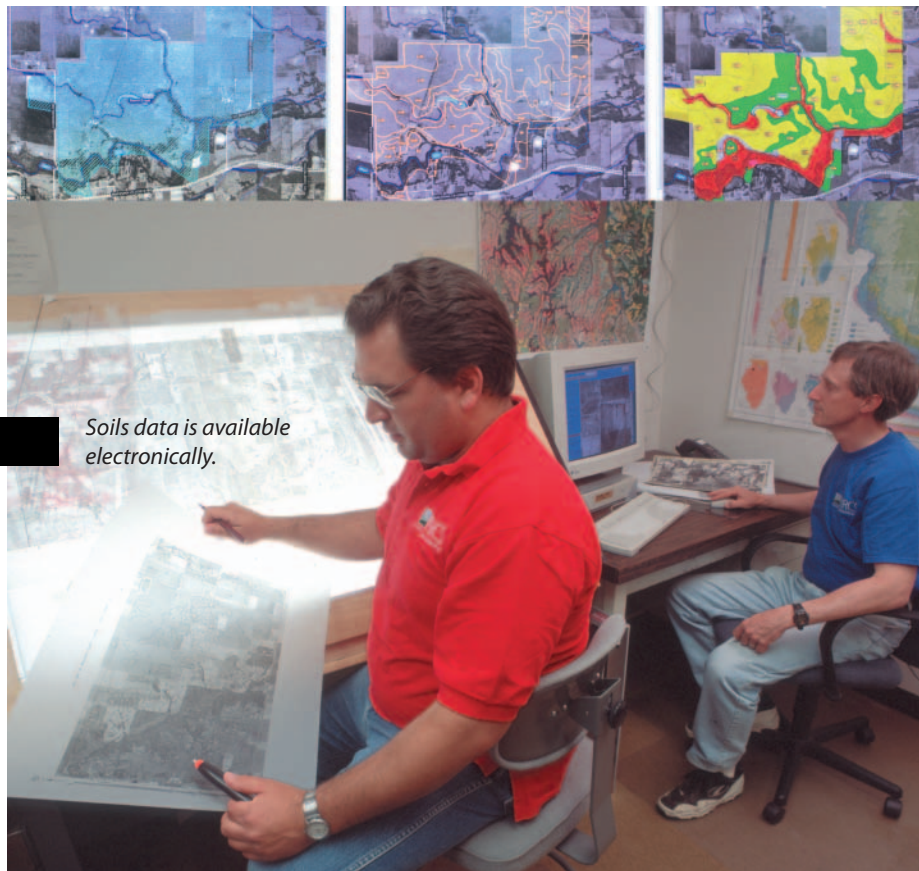
As the Nation's conservation agenda continues to become more complex, the need for technical information and advice will increasingly exceed the capacity of the Federal workforce to respond in a timely manner. The 2002 Farm Bill provided a solution to this problem by reauthorizing the use of non-Federal entities to assist participants in USDA conservation programs. NRCS has established processes to certify individual technical service providers (TSPs) and to enter into agreements with governmental and non-governmental entities to provide services. Over time, as the market develops, private sector technical service providers will play an increasing role in meeting the growing demand for conservation services. To facilitate partnerships between NRCS, agricultural producers, and technical service providers, NRCS will:

- Work with TSPs to enhance technical competencies;
- Evaluate the economic, technical, and customer service effectiveness of TSPs; and
- Ensure the TSP certification process complies with the conservation planning certification process and other verifiable processes.

Management Goal:
Make effective use of Internet-based technology to provide customer-focused service.

Many NRCS customers are increasing their use of the Internet to find information, conduct business, and communicate with others. In addition to continuing traditional lines of communication, NRCS is committed to providing services electronically to those customers who have the capability to use electronic communications and information management technology. Making more services available electronically will improve efficiency and performance by allowing customers, partners, and employees to reduce travel time, readily share data, and complete transactions more quickly.

NRCS will improve and enhance its electronic delivery system in three ways. We will:



Soils data is available electronically.

- Expand self-service options available to customers by creating self-assessment eligibility tools for programs; developing web-based common application forms for programs; designing and making available a "Conservation Program Self-Service Tool" that enables producers to create their own conservation plans and select conservation programs that help them meet their objectives; improving e-Authentication to ensure external customers a secure environment; and enabling the public to comment easily during the rulemaking process;
- Foster sharing of data with customers and partners by enabling easy access to selected data, including soils, climate, and hydrology data, conservation practice information, maps, and other related analysis products; and
- Improve internal business processes by offering our employees electronic learning courses, implementing a nationwide automated system to expedite hiring processes, and improving and developing electronic field office business tools.

Financial Performance

The public investment in conservation through programs administered by NRCS has increased substantially. It is the responsibility of NRCS to ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent wisely and efficiently and are protected from fraud and misuse. The President's Improving Financial Performance Initiative centers on improving the quality and timeliness of Federal financial information.

In order to strengthen financial management controls, NRCS is instituting a permanent framework for assessing risk, measuring payment accuracy, and initiating financial management improvements.

To ensure that NRCS is issuing accurate and timely financial information and minimizing improper payments, the Agency will:

- Migrate all financial programs to automated, centralized contract and payment systems, where practicable;
- Accelerate accurate end-of-year reporting;
- Require comparative financial reporting;
- Improve timeliness of payments by expanding the use of Web-based reporting technologies;
- Introduce additional controls to ensure program eligibility requirements are met; and
- Conduct internal reviews to reduce error and evaluate financial management procedures.

Budget and Performance Integration

The Budget and Performance Integration Initiative of the President's Management Agenda requires that agencies use performance information to manage activities and programs, justify requests for funds on the basis of the performance expected, and continually improve the efficiency of their operations and programs. NRCS has developed an integrated accountability system that tracks financial and performance data by program. Data from the integrated accountability system allows managers at all levels of the organization to monitor program performance, costs, and obligations. This system enables integration of performance data with data on the full cost of programs to support budget requests and allocation decisions, and measures progress on the Agency's strategic, performance, and business plans. This system received the American Society for Public Administration's prestigious Organizational Leadership Award in May 2003 and has been featured at over a dozen performance management forums around the Nation.

To continue to strengthen the integration of budget and performance, NRCS will:

- Periodically assess resource conservation needs across the country;
- Develop and use efficiency measures to improve effectiveness for each conservation program;
- Develop and use common performance measures to facilitate program streamlining and ensure unified outcomes are achieved across program boundaries, where appropriate;
- Utilize data on performance, efficiency, and conservation needs in program allocation formulas to achieve greater conservation;
- Conduct internal oversight reviews to evaluate program effectiveness and efficiency; and
- Ensure that the multi-level performance appraisal system for individual performance is linked to the Agency's strategic plan for all organizational units and at all organizational levels; that employees' performance awards link to the Agency's strategic plan goals; and that supervisors are accountable for performance management of their employees.

Appendices:

Appendix 1.
Linking Strategic Goals to Annual Program Performance

Performance goals provide the link between the long-term goals established through strategic planning and the day-to-day activities of Agency personnel.

The objectives in this plan form the basis for developing annual performance goals over the next 5 years. Annual goals are indicators of progress that relate directly to a Mission Goal, but can be measured annually. The annual goals help guide the allocation of staff and financial resources.

In NRCS, performance goals are developed at the national and state levels. National performance goals are developed as part of the process of formulating the President's Budget. These goals provide the framework for the development of state performance goals. State goals reflect local priorities identified by State conservationists through the performance planning process. They also reflect the level of resources available to the Agency in the appropriation signed by the President.

Performance targets may be reached through different approaches in different parts of the Nation. In each State, Agency managers craft an approach to most efficiently work toward national and local goals.

Explanation of Terms:

Mission Goals identify the benefits that the Agency was established to help people achieve and maintain. Mission Goals are characterized as Foundation Goals or Venture Goals. Foundation Goals address the land uses and resource concerns that have been the NRCS' primary focus throughout our existence and continue to be the foundation of a healthy landscape. Venture Goals address resource issues that are growing in importance as a result of current economic and demographic trends.

Outcomes provide an expanded definition of the resource condition identified by the concise goal statements. These definitions of ideal conditions are translated into feasible milestones as objectives to be achieved within an identified time frame.

Objectives include a performance measure, a quantified target to be achieved by an identified date, and a baseline against which progress can be monitored.

The performance measures used in objectives are

considered the best current measures of progress on issues that are primary purposes of major programs. Measures were identified by program managers, based on the authorizing legislation for separate programs. Measures are those for which baseline data are available and methodology exists for determining performance. For some natural resource outcomes, work is being conducted to develop performance measures that better communicate the results of conservation efforts. As data become available, future planning cycles will utilize those measures in defining Agency objectives.

The Agency targets shown in this plan are the aggregate of program-specific long-range targets projected by national program managers on the basis of current program authorities, funding levels, and workload information.

For some Venture Goals, specific objectives have not been set because data are currently not available to define a baseline or to project and then monitor the effects of applying conservation practices. Nevertheless, these issues are important and will be affected by the Agency's activities in the period covered by this plan.

Key Conservation Practices for Reaching the Objective

Progress toward objectives is the result of conservation applied on the land by farmers, ranchers, and other land managers. NRCS employees help individuals and communities assess their resources, develop plans for management actions that will protect and maintain resource condition, and apply treatment according to the plan. The table lists the major conservation practices that will contribute most to achieving the objective. In addition to the practices shown, additional practices are needed on many sites to address site-specific conditions and meet the land manager's individual objectives.

For some Venture Goals, specific objective targets have not been established. Agency programs and conservation practices, however, do make contributions toward achieving the desired outcome. Those "Associated Conservation Practices" have been identified.

Conservation practices typically affect multiple resources. Therefore, some practices are shown as helping to meet several objectives.

Annual Performance Measures

Objectives are the foundation for annual performance goals. Most annual performance measures are plans developed and practices applied by land managers with NRCS assistance. For inventory and technology development programs, annual measures are program outputs.

Programs

Annual performance targets are set for each measure for each appropriate program. Annual targets are based on the staff time required to complete the work and the funds available to support each program activity.

For some objectives, programs other than those shown in the table will have some effect on meeting the objective.

Foundation Goals

Mission Goal	*Outcome*	*Objective*	*Key Conservation Practices for Reaching the Objective*	Annual Performance Measures	*Programs*
High Quality, Productive Soils	Soil Quality: The quality of intensively used soils is maintained or enhanced to enable sustained production of a safe, healthy and abundant food supply.	By 2010, farmers will manage 70 percent of cropland under systems that maintain or improve soil condition and increase soil carbon.	Residue management Conservation crop rotations Terracing Strip cropping Critical area plantings Cover crops	Conservation plans developed on cropland; number	CO (CTA)
				Reduction in the acreage of cropland soils damaged by erosion; acres	CO (CTA), EQIP, AMA, CRP
				Soil erosion reduced; tons	CO (CTA), EQIP, AMA, FRPP
				Soil surveys mapped or updated; acres	CO (Soil Survey)
				New plant materials released; number	CO (Conservation Plant Materials)
				Foundation seed stock maintained; number	
				Cropland enrolled in CSP with enhancements applied to increase soil quality; acres	CSP

Mission Goal	Outcome	Objective	Key Conservation Practices for Reaching the Objective	Annual Performance Measures	Programs
Clean and Abundant Water	Water Quality: The quality of surface waters and groundwater is restored and maintained to protect human health, support a healthy environment, and encourage a productive landscape.	By 2010, agricultural producers will reduce potential delivery of sediment and nutrients from their operations: • potential delivery of sediment will be reduced by 70 million tons. • potential delivery of nitrogen will be reduced by 375,000 tons. • potential delivery of phosphorus will be reduced by 70,000 tons.	Buffer practices	CNMP written; number	CO (CTA), EQIP
			Nutrient management		
			Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP)	CNMP applied; number	CO (CTA), EQIP
			Grade stabilization structures	Land with nutrient management enhancements applied that exceed quality criteria; acres	CSP
			Wetland restoration		
				Watershed or area-wide conservation plans developed for water or air quality; number	CO (CTA), PL-06, RC&D
				Long-term contracts completed during the fiscal year for the purpose of water quality improvement; number	PL-566, PL-534
				Wetlands created, enhanced and restored; acres	WRP

Mission Goal	Outcome	Objective	Key Conservation Practices for Reaching the Objective	Annual Performance Measures	Programs
Clean and Abundant Water (cont.)	Water Quantity: Water is conserved and protected to ensure an abundant and reliable supply for the Nation.	By 2010, conserve 8 million acre-feet of water.	Irrigation water management	Irrigation efficiency improved; acre-feet	CO (CTA), EQIP, AMA
			Irrigation systems	Water supply forecasts issued; number	CO (Snow Survey)
			Irrigation water conveyance	Watershed or area-wide resource plans, studies or inventories for water conservation or water supply; number	CO (CTA), PL-06
			Structure for water control	Multi-purpose water supply reservoirs installed; number	PL-566, PL-534
				Watershed or area-wide resource plans, studies or inventories for flood prevention or mitigation; number	CO (CTA), PL-06
				Flood prevention or mitigation measures installed, including structures, easements, and other measures; number	PL-566, PL-534

Mission Goal	Outcome	Objective	Key Conservation Practices for Reaching the Objective	Annual Performance Measures	Programs
Clean and Abundant Water (cont.)				Unsafe dams rehabilitated or removed; number	Watershed Rehab
Healthy Plant and Animal Communities	Grassland, Rangeland, and Forest Ecosystems: Grassland, rangeland, and forest ecosystems are productive, diverse, and resilient.	By 2010, farmers, ranchers, and private non-industrial forest owners will apply management that will maintain or improve long-term vegetative condition on 150 million acres of grazing and forest land.	Prescribed grazing Integrated pest management Brush management Prescribed burning Use exclusion	Conservation plans written for grazing land; acres	CO (CTA)
				Grazing land with conservation applied to treat the resource base; acres	CO (CTA), EQIP
				Land with grazing management enhancements applied that exceed quality criteria; acres	CSP
				Non-federal land managed for the protection and enhancement of habitat for species with declining populations; acres	WHIP
				Grazing land protected by a conservation easement; cumulative acres	GRP
				New plant materials released to commercial growers; number	CO (Conservation Plant Materials)

Mission Goal	Outcome	Objective	Key Conservation Practices for Reaching the Objective	Annual Performance Measures	Programs
Healthy Plant and Animal Communities (cont.)	Fish and Wildlife Habitat: Working lands and waters provide habitat for diverse and healthy wildlife, aquatic species, and plant communities.	By 2010, an additional 9 million acres of essential habitat will be improved and managed to benefit at-risk and declining species.	Restoration and management of declining habitats	Non-federal land treated for fish and wildlife habitat; acres	CO (CTA), CRP, RC&D, WHIP
			Stream corridor restoration Food plots Wetland wildlife habitat management Upland wildlife habitat management	Non-federal land managed for the protection and enhancement of habitat for species with declining populations; acres	CO (CTA), EQIP, WHIP, GRP
	Wetlands: Wetlands provide quality habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife, protect water quality, and reduce flood damages.	By 2010, resource managers will create, restore, or enhance 1.5 million acres of wetlands on non-Federal lands.	Wetland restoration Wetland creation Wetland enhancement	Wetlands created, restored or enhanced; acres	CO (CTA), WRP, CRP

Venture Goals

Mission Goal	*Outcome*	*Objective*	*Associated Conservation Practices*	*Annual Performance Measures*	*Programs*
Clean Air	Air Quality: Agriculture makes a positive contribution to local air quality and the Nation's efforts to sequester carbon.	To be established. The objective will be measured by tons of carbon sequestered.	Atmospheric resource quality management Windbreak establishment Cover crops Residue management Irrigation management Mulching Conservation crop rotations Pastureland Management Tree plantings	Watershed or area-wide plans develolped for air quality; number	CO (CTA), PL-06, RC&D EQIP, CSP, WRP (annual measures to be established)
An Adequate Energy Supply	Energy: Agricultural activities conserve energy, and agricultural lands are a source of environmentally sustainable biofuels and renewable energy.	To be established. The objective will be measured by BTUs conserved.	Residue management Comprehensive nutrient management		EQIP, CSP
Working Farm and Ranch Lands	Connected landscapes sustain a viable agricultural sector and natural resource quality.	By 2010, 70 percent of farms and ranches protected under easements will remain in active agriculture.		Farmland and grazing land protected by conservation easements; acres Prime, unique, and important farmland protected by conservation easements from conversion to non-agricultural uses; acres	FRPP, GRP FRPP

Appendix 2. Program Evaluations

Periodic evaluations of the implementation and accomplishments of individual conservation programs administered by NRCS are a critical element of overall performance measurement. Findings of periodic and annual evaluations are used to refine Agency objectives and guide Agency strategic planning. A variety of program reviews and evaluations are routinely conducted within NRCS:

- Program managers conduct programmatic reviews to assess the propriety of program implementation at the field level.
- The Oversight and Evaluation Staff conducts independent reviews of programs to ascertain compliance with existing laws, executive orders, regulations, policies, and procedures. Review types include surveys, comprehensive reviews, and quick response reviews, depending on the issue, scope, and depth of review needed.
- State offices are responsible for compliance reviews of the individual programmatic activities and for operational reviews within their jurisdictions.

Since 2003, reviews have been conducted of program management issues for the Agency's financial assistance programs to assess management controls and ensure efficiency of operations and adherence to policy and rules.

A "Logic Model" analysis of each Agency program has been conducted to clarify the primary outcomes authorized for the program and establish annual, long-term, and efficiency measures for evaluating the performance of the program. The performance measures and targets developed through the Logic Model process provided the basis for the Objectives in this strategic plan.

The Logic Model process was coordinated with reviews conducted with the Office of Management and Budget using the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART).

During the period covered by this strategic plan, NRCS will conduct the following major evaluations of its programs.

Program Evaluation

Program Evaluations	*General Scope*	*End date*
Program Evaluation of the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program	Identify opportunities for improvements in achieving program purpose.	2006
Program Evaluation of Water Resources Programs	Determine whether water resources programs provide duplicative services, are streamlined for efficiency, and are as effective as they can be in meeting objectives.	2006
Activity-Based Costing Assessment	Develop estimates of the time, by technical discipline, required at all levels of the Agency to produce each of the major products and services of Agency programs.	2006
Assessment of the environmental benefits of Farm Bill Conservation Programs	Agency effort to develop capacity to report in quantitative terms the annual soil quality improvements, water quality improvements, and carbon sequestration gains resulting from application of conservation under the Farm Bill programs.	2008
Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Resources Conservation and Development Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program, National Resources Inventory, Soil Survey Program, Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting Program, and Plant Materials Program	Conduct internal program evaluations of all Agency programs to assess how effectively each contributes to achieving the desired outcomes and to estimate benefits achieved, cost effectiveness, and extent to which customer needs and congressional intent are met. In addition, reviews using OMB's PART tool will be conducted in cooperation with OMB.	2007-2010

Appendix 3.
Key External Factors

The goals, objectives, and strategies identified in this strategic plan are all affected by factors driving change in society. These driving forces—fundamental changes in family structure and the workforce, globalization of markets and culture, catastrophic natural events, advances in information and biological and other technologies—are at work in agriculture as well. These factors affect NRCS internal processes and the resources necessary to deliver services. NRCS goals and strategies are based on analysis of the external environment and are designed to respond effectively within the context of current conditions. Nevertheless, some factors beyond the control of NRCS may strongly influence our ability to achieve our objectives. The most influential of these uncontrollable external factors include:

Economic forces affecting agriculture. Agricultural producers now operate in a global, technologically advanced, rapidly diversifying, highly competitive business environment that is driven by increasingly sophisticated consumers. Economic forces, such as global and domestic market fluctuations, competition, and economies of scale affect profitability, product mix decisions, international trade agreements, and advances in technology. And, complexity of operations have contributed to shifts in the location of production, changes in the size of production units, and the vertical integration of livestock production and other industries. Ranchers and operators of large farms are sensitive to the fluctuations of global markets. Smaller operations generally depend on non-farm income to maintain viability and are therefore closely bound to other parts of the economy. Regardless of scale, the ability of farmers and ranchers to implement conservation practices or adopt new technology is strongly affected by their immediate economic situation and their personal cost/benefit analysis of adopting new conservation measures.

Demographic pressures driving use of natural resources. Global population continues to increase. A growing and increasingly mobile world population results in greater ethnic and racial diversity in this Nation's communities. The Nation's population is no longer largely rural; nearly 80 percent of Americans live in urban and suburban areas. Population is also highly concentrated, with nearly 75 percent living within 2 hours of a coast. Rates of population growth in the past few years have been high in the West, where water supplies are generally limited and many ecosystems are fragile. Greater population densities exert greater pressures on the environment,

creating a need for increased effort to minimize the impacts. Continuing demand for new sites for homes and industries, transportation, and recreation results in conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses and fragmentation of open space. As the landscape increasingly becomes a mosaic of developed areas scattered within agricultural land, the need for conservation increases while the options available to producers may be constrained. Demographic changes also have implications for the delivery of appropriate conservation assistance to an increasingly diverse customer base that is no longer primarily rural. Effectively protecting resources and the environment in this diverse landscape requires the joint effort of many entities across wide areas of the landscape. Activities in parts of an area outside USDA influence can offset the effects of improved management of agricultural land, so that the watershed or ecosystem as a whole may fail to show the expected improvement.

Dependence on external sources for conservation technology. Advances in agricultural production technology can have both beneficial and adverse effects on the environment. Research on the possible environmental impacts of new technology and development of effective ways to address existing and emerging problems is of critical importance. NRCS depends heavily on conservation technology developed by other agencies, land grant institutions, and the private sector. These entities' continued investment in research and development for conservation technology is essential for the Agency's success. If development of new conservation technology does not keep pace with changes in environmental and agricultural conditions, we may be poorly equipped to meet emerging needs and achieve the conservation targets identified in this plan.

Unusual or prolonged adverse environmental conditions. Weather extremes always pose a challenge to agriculture and conservation. Recent episodic events such as drought, flooding, hurricanes, and major wildfires have caused substantial damage to soil, water, wildlife habitat, and related natural resources. If these events occur on a large scale, or are unusually frequent during the next five years, it may be extremely difficult to achieve the natural resource improvements envisioned in this plan.

Availability of technical expertise to advise natural resource managers. The public's financial investment in helping producers implement conservation was greatly expanded by the 2002 Farm Bill. In the next few years, we anticipate that the market-based approach will spur private investment to augment the public funds invested in conservation. Most producers, however, need technical advice and assistance to plan and apply effective conservation. The NRCS workforce did not significantly increase as a result of the 2002 Farm Bill. As directed in the Farm Bill, NRCS has established a process to certify private sector technical service providers (TSPs) to help producers plan and implement conservation. The cadre of TSPs is increasing slowly. While producers in some parts of the country have access to TSPs for at least some types of technical assistance, the combined public and private workforce is still not able to provide timely assistance in many areas.

Appendix 4.
Strategic Planning in NRCS

Strategic Planning in NRCS involves all levels of the Agency, as well as local, State, and Tribal governments, government agencies, and other partners and stakeholders. It is a continuing process by which the Agency envisions its future and identifies the procedures, operations, and resources necessary to achieve that future. Activities are conducted in accordance with the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 and USDA guidelines.

The NRCS strategic planning process includes:

Inventories and Assessments
Information on the status, condition, and trends of the Nation's natural resources as well as workload, performance, and workforce data is gathered and assessed to determine resource concerns and approaches to address identified needs. Information is gathered at all levels of the Agency, from national assessments to locally identified priorities.

Identification and Analysis of Alternatives
Alternative strategies for addressing identified resource concerns are developed and analyzed. Science-based resource analyses project the impact on resource conditions, and workload analyses define costs.

Consultation and Consensus
Consultation with stakeholders, partners, government agencies, Tribes, and interest groups helps define general goals, objectives, and performance targets.

Communication
The plan, with the associated goals and performance targets, is communicated to all levels of the Agency and to all stakeholders.

Evaluation of Results
Review and evaluation identify new information and analytical needs, leading in to the next planning cycle.

FY 2005 Strategic Planning Process

During FY 2005, NRCS initiated an intensive strategic planning process to establish the Agency's priorities and direction for the next 10 to 20 years. A core work team representing all levels of the Agency and all regions developed the planning process, identified needed information, and prepared working materials for consideration by the steering team. The steering team, composed of State conservationists and national-level officials, evaluated options and made recommendations to the Chief.

The planning process included assessments of both internal and external conditions and issues. Core team analysts consulted with Agency discipline experts and reviewed studies conducted by NRCS and other agencies. They designed and conducted a Web-based survey of employees. The planning process also included more than 20 meetings and focus group sessions with external customers, partners, and other stakeholders. Key findings from focus group sessions are identified in Appendix 8.

The assessments provided data and information on natural resource issues, customer needs, and Agency products and services. The steering team defined and made preliminary assessments of the Agency's key customers: who they are today and who they may be in the future. Based on analyses of this information, the Agency's strategic plan includes revised natural resource goals and objectives and key tasks for achieving them.

Appendix 5.
NRCS Programs and Their Legislative Authorities

NRCS program	*Authority*
Conservation Operations (CO): -Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) -Soil Survey -Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting -Conservation Plant Materials	Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977 (16 U.S.C. 2001-2009) Soil Surveys for Resource Planning and Development Act of 1966 (40 U.S.C. Chapter 40 3271-3274) Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1935 (16 U.S.C. 590a-f)(590q) Farmland Protection Policy Act of 1981 (7 U.S.C 4201)
Watershed Surveys and Planning	Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (16 U.S.C. 1001-1012)
Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (P.L.-566, P.L.-534)	Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (P.L. 83-566), as amended (16 U.S.C. 1001-1009) Flood Control Act of 1944 (P.L. 78-534)(33 U.S.C. 701b-1)
Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP)	Agricultural Credit Act of 1978 (16 U.S.C. 2203) Emergency Operations authorization of 1950 (16 U.S.C. 701b-1)
Resource Conservation and Development Program (RC&D)	Agriculture and Food Act of 1981 (16 U.S.C. 3451), as amended
Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)	Food Security Act of 1985 (16 U.S.C. 3837, et. seq.), as amended
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	Food Security Act of 1985 (16 U.S.C. 3839aa, et. seq.), as amended
Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP)	Food Security Act of 1985 (16 U.S.C. 3838h and 3838i), as amended
Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)	Food Security Act of 1985 (16 U.S.C. 3839bb-1), as amended
Watershed Rehabilitation Program	Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (16 U.S.C. 1001-1012), as amended
Conservation Security Program (CSP)	Food Security Act of 1985, (16 U.S.C. 3838 et. seq.), as amended
Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)	Food Security Act of 1985, (16 U.S.C. 3838n et.seq.), as amended

Appendix 6.
Summary of NRCS Goals, Outcomes, and Objectives

Mission Goal	*Outcome*	*Objective*
High-quality, Productive Soils	Soil Quality: The quality of intensively used soils is maintained or enhanced to enable sustained production of a safe, healthy, and abundant food supply.	By 2010, farmers will manage 70 percent of cropland under systems that maintain or increase soil condition and soil carbon.
Clean and Abundant Water	Water Quality: The quality of surface waters and groundwater is restored and maintained to protect human health, support a healthy environment, and encourage a productive landscape.	By 2010, agricultural operators will reduce potential delivery of sediment and nutrients from their operations: • Potential delivery of sediment will be reduced by 70 million tons. • Potential delivery of nitrogen will be reduced by 375,000 tons. • Potential delivery of phosphorus will be reduced by 70,000 tons.
	Water Quantity: Water is conserved and protected to ensure an abundant and reliable supply for the Nation.	By 2010, 8 million acre-feet of water will be conserved.
Healthy Plant and Animal Communities	Grasslands, Rangeland, and Forest Ecosystems: Grassland, rangeland, and forest ecosystems are productive, diverse and resilient.	By 2010, farmers, ranchers, and private non-industrial forest owners will apply management that will maintain or improve long-term vegetative condition on 150 million acres of grazing and forest land.
	Fish and Wildlife Habitat: Working lands and waters provide habitat for diverse and healthy wildlife, aquatic species, and plant communities.	By 2010, an additional 9 million acres of essential habitat will be improved and managed to benefit at-risk and declining species.
	Wetlands: Wetlands provide quality habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife, protect water quality, and reduce flood damages.	By 2010, land managers will create, restore or enhance 1.5 million acres of wetlands on non-Federal.
Clean Air	Air Quality: Agriculture makes a positive contribution to local air quality and to the Nation's efforts to sequester carbon.	To be established. The objective will be measured by tons of carbon sequestered.
An Adequate Energy Supply	Agricultural activities conserve energy and agricultural lands are a source of environmentally sustainable biofuels and renewable energy.	To be established. The objective will be measured by BTUs conserved.
Working Farm and Ranch Lands	Connected landscapes that sustain a viable agriculture and natural resource quality.	By 2015, 70 percent of farms and ranches protected under easements will remain in active agriculture.

Appendix 7.
Linkage of NRCS Strategic Plan to USDA Strategic Plan for FY 2005-2010

USDA Strategic Goal/ Objective	*Agency Strategic Goal*	*Key Outcome*	*Agency Objectives*
USDA Strategic Goal 6: Protect and Enhance the Nation's Natural Resource Base and Environment **USDA Strategic Objective 6.1:** Protect Watershed Health to Ensure Clean and Abundant Water	**Agency Goal:** Clean and Abundant Water	*Water Quality:* The quality of surface waters and groundwater is restored and maintained to protect human health, support a healthy environment, and encourage a productive landscape.	*Objective:* By 2010, agricultural producers will reduce potential delivery of sediment and nutrients from their operations: • potential delivery of sediment will be reduced by 70 million tons. • potential delivery of nitrogen will be reduced by 375,000 tons. • potential delivery of phosphorus will be reduced by 70,000 tons.
		Water Quantity: Water is conserved and protected to ensure an abundant and reliable supply for the Nation.	*Objective:* By 2010, conserve 8 million acre-feet of water.
	Agency Goal: Working Farm and Ranch Lands	*Working Farm and Ranch Land Preservation:* Connected landscapes sustain a viable agriculture and natural resource quality.	*Objective:* By 2010, 70 percent of farms and ranches protected under easements will remain in agriculture.
USDA Strategic Goal 6: Protect and Enhance the Nation's Natural Resource Base and Environment **USDA Strategic Objective 6.2:** Enhance Soil Quality to Maintain Productive Working Cropland	**Agency Goal:** High Quality, Productive Soils	*Soil Quality:* The quality of intensively used soils is maintained or enhanced to enable sustained production of a safe, healthy, and abundant food supply.	*Objective:* By 2010, farmers will manage 70 percent of cropland under systems that maintain or improve soil condition and increase soil carbon.
	Agency Goal: Clean Air	*Air Resources:* Agriculture makes a positive contribution to local air quality and the Nation's efforts to sequester carbon.	*Objective:* To be established. The objective will be measured by tons of carbon sequestered.

USDA Strategic Goal/ Objective	Agency Strategic Goal	Key Outcome	Agency Objectives
	Agency Goal: An Adequate Energy Supply	*Energy:* Agricultural activities conserve energy and agricultural lands are a source of environmentally sustainable biofuels and renewable energy.	*Objective:* To be established. The objective will be measured by BTUs conserved.
USDA Strategic Goal 6: Protect and Enhance the Nation's Natural Resource Base and Environment **USDA Strategic Objective 6.3:** Protect Forests and Grazing Lands	**Agency Goal:** Healthy Plant and Animal Communities	*Grasslands, Rangeland, and Forest Ecosystems:* Grassland, rangeland, and forest ecosystems are productive, diverse, and resilient.	*Objective:* By 2010, farmers, ranchers, and private non-industrial forest owners will apply management that will maintain or improve long-term vegetative condition on 150 million acres of grazing and forest land.
USDA Strategic Goal 6: Protect and Enhance the Nation's Natural Resource Base and Environment **USDA Strategic Objective 6.4:** Protect and Enhance Wildlife Habitat to Benefit Desired, At-Risk, and Declining Species	**Agency Goal:** Healthy Plant and Animal Communities	*Fish and Wildlife Habitat:* Working lands and waters provide habitat for diverse and healthy wildlife, aquatic species, and plant communities.	*Objective:* By 2010, an additional 9 million acres of essential habitat will be improved and managed to benefit at-risk and declining species.
		Wetlands: Wetlands provide quality habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife, protect water quality, and reduce flood damages.	*Objective:* By 2010, resource managers will create, restore, or enhance 1.5 million acres of wetlands on non-Federal lands.

Appendix 8.
Customer Focus Groups – Key Findings

In summer 2005, 11 customer focus group meetings were held across the country in order to gather information from NRCS' diverse customer base. Groups were asked for input on how the Agency could improve and adjust its services and products in the next 2-5 years, as well as what the group foresaw as the drivers of change in the next 20 years. The meetings were undertaken through a formal agreement with the National Association of Conservation Districts and conducted by an external third party consulting firm with focus groups expertise. The 11 focus group meetings were held in the locations at right.

Meeting	*Date*	*Location*
1	May 24, 2005	Dixon, CA
2	May 25, 2005	Billings, MT
3	May 26, 2005	Monmouth, IL
4	May 31, 2005	Millbrook, NY
5	June 2, 2005	Victoria, TX
6	June 3, 2005	Aurora, CO
7	June 7, 2005	Canton, MS
8	August 3, 2005	Grand Forks, ND
9	August 12, 2005	Oregon City, OR
10	August 17, 2005	Hadley, MA
11	August 18, 2005	Sanford, NC

Approximately 15 to 20 participants attended each focus group. Meeting attendees included a broad range of current and future clients, including livestock and crop producers, as well as consultants and non-profit organizations.

Natural Resource Concerns

The most common themes were related to land fragmentation, urban sprawl, the proliferation of smaller farms operated by residential or lifestyle farmers, and the rise of absentee landownership.

Attendees expressed that increasing land values and urban sprawl were the largest contributors to reduced profitability, increasing rents, absentee ownership, and the declining entry of new farmers. Attendees also expressed their concern that rising land

values have caused landowners to be more interested in short-term profitable uses for their land, rather than the long-term sustainability of their land and the adoption of conservation practices. Absentee owners and producers with limited lease options are reluctant to invest in conservation practices that come at a cost and are not transportable. With increasingly less land to farm, particularly in urban fringe areas, producers are exploring ways to make less land more profitable, including diversification, exploration of niche crops, precision farming, and agri-tourism.

Water quality and future water supplies were common themes shared throughout the focus groups. Focus groups stressed the need to maintain and improve water quality, by addressing nutrient and pesticide runoff from cropland and animal operations and by controlling point source pollution from developed areas. In addition, focus group attendees expressed concern about depleting aquifers and the need to retain water for agricultural uses. Integrated water management planning that considers water provision and waste water management is needed, particularly where development pressures are the greatest. Attendees suggested that NRCS take an active role in watershed management planning, by facilitating the convening of water boards, assessing and identifying water availability, and working to develop additional water conservation measures that address water conservation and reduce the negative impacts of flooding.

Focus group attendees expressed a desire to maintain wildlife populations and ensure their genetic diversity. In some portions of the country, attendees expressed a need to retain old growth forests and woodlands. They also requested more data and information on brush and animal control and invasive species.

NRCS Technical Services

Focus groups stressed the need for NRCS to continue to provide science-based, technical expertise. There is an expectation that NRCS can and should provide conservation planning and analysis skills to address conservation issues at the farm and ranch scale, as well as at the community, watershed and regional level. A majority of participants believe NRCS has the technical capabilities to develop the variety of tools necessary to meet future needs; however, the focus groups were less certain about the effective deployment of these tools to adjust to local conditions. Among all of the focus groups, there was a consistent call for more help in the form of technical assistance to accomplish conservation, with and without financial assistance.

Focus group attendees requested that NRCS continue to develop comprehensive standards, such as those contained within the Field Office Technical Guides, soil surveys, and other natural resource data tools, with an emphasis on making them easy to read, understandable, and flexible for use at the local level. Information and outreach continues to be important, despite a declining staff capacity available for outreach. While one-on-one visits may be less and less feasible, Web sites, public meetings, and targeting

specific audiences may be the best approach to achieve conservation outcomes.

Attendees supported the role of NRCS and the conservation districts and the grassroots delivery system. They expressed the need for NRCS to continue to cultivate partnerships across Federal, Tribal, State, and local boundaries to achieve common goals, such as sediment reduction in reservoirs, estuary health, and other water quality and water supply concerns. To accomplish these partnering tasks, there is a need to employ and train NRCS staff to have the skills and capabilities necessary to establish and foster partnerships.

Financial Assistance

Attendees supported the use of financial assistance to address resource needs and the need for continued funding by Congress of these programs. Attendees discouraged two-week sign-up periods and requested the ability to make programs flexible at the local level to address specific resource needs. Suggestions to improve existing programs included: streamlining existing programs; making them more user-friendly with simple, easy-to-read forms; hosting eligibility and sign-up meetings; and working with tenants to help them "sell" conservation to absentee landowners.

Future Directions

The focus groups saw the need for NRCS to provide technical and financial assistance in the areas of water quality, farm and ranch land protection, wildlife habitat, invasive and noxious plant species control, carbon sequestration, and renewable energy. The Agency should focus on educating the broader public about conservation, as demographics change and agricultural operations become more diversified, with a more varied clientele. For example, attendees suggested that NRCS work with developers to install buffer zones, minimizing friction between rural and urban land users. Attendees also encouraged the development of a rural lands mitigation banking program that would require developers to contribute to purchase of development rights programs and other conservation programs that would offset the negative environmental impacts of development in rural areas. Related to urban encroachment and land fragmentation, there is a need to expand technical guidelines and programs to assist small-lot owners with wildlife, soil and water conservation.

In summary, attendees believed NRCS should continue to provide technical expertise to individuals and groups on private lands to address soil, water, wildlife, and other natural resource, concerns. The Agency should also work to expand and foster partnerships to address regional and watershed-scale efforts, obtaining multiple resource benefits in the process. To ensure quality decisionmaking now and in the future, NRCS should continue to focus on maintaining a complete national technical assistance infrastructure with emphasis on the technical data, information, knowledge, tools, and procedures.

Appendix 9.
All Employee Survey – Summary of Results

In July 2005, an All Employee Survey was conducted to gather input from Agency staff at all organizational levels. The survey was made available via the Agency's Intranet and was active for a two-week period. Employees were asked to respond to 15 questions that sought their perspectives on a wide range of issues including the Agency mission statement and guiding principles, business lines, customer segments, natural resource concerns, and service delivery.

Survey results were used to inform the Strategic Planning Steering Team deliberations, often serving to illuminate points of divergence. Survey results were particularly useful in guiding discussions on mission and vision statements and customer segments, and in defining the Agency mission goals, objectives, and key tasks reflected in this plan. The following summarizes key survey results.

Survey Response and Respondents

Nearly 3,000 survey responses were received. Three-fourths of the responses were from field office employees, engaged in providing technical assistance directly to Agency customers. The majority were Agency employees of 11 years or longer. Geographic distribution of responses was fairly uniform across the Agency's three regions.

Mission and Values

Employees strongly support and are motivated by the Agency's core mission of helping people conserve, maintain, and improve natural resources. Most employees feel that they and their colleagues are committed to a service organization and agree that "Technical Excellence" is highly valued. They also feel that they have the knowledge and skills to perform their jobs effectively.

Customers

The agricultural customer segment is clearly the primary group with whom Agency employees work. Full- and part-time farmers and ranchers, limited resource producers, and conservation partners are the primary users of Agency products and services. These groups are expected to remain the Agency's primary customers in the future. While specialty crop producers, communicators, citizen groups, and private sector consultants will be increasing their use of Agency products and services, they are expected to remain a small share of the overall Agency customer base.

Technical Service Delivery

Employees value the technical assistance delivery system, and identify one-on-one technical assistance as the current and future emphasis for service delivery. Conservation planning and technical consultations and conservation implementation currently comprise about half of employees' daily work activity. Customer demand for conservation planning and technical consultations is expected to increase over the next 10 to 20 years, as is the importance of electronic information and service delivery methods.

Natural Resource Issues

Soil erosion and water quality are the leading natural resource issues for which customers presently seek assistance from Agency employees. In the future, water quantity, soil and plant condition, and connected landscapes are expected to increase in importance, but will not outpace soil erosion and water quality as the primary natural resource issues.

Appendix 10. NRCS Business Lines

NRCS Business Lines and Product and Service Descriptions

The mission of the Natural Resources Conservation Service is Helping People Help the Land.

In fulfilling that "helping people" portion of this natural-resource-based mission, NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to land owners and managers through five business lines. Business lines are groups of similar products and services that Agency employees deliver to external customers. There are 15 core products and services in the business lines. Four of the five business lines are technical assistance based and one is financial assistance.

NRCS Business Line: Conservation Planning and Technical Consultations

Conservation Planning and Technical Consultations results in either the transfer of data, information, or a conservation plan that helps customers protect, and conserve natural resources (soil, water, air, plant and animal) within their social and economic interests. The planning process will identify natural resource problems and opportunities, determine objectives, inventory resources, analyze resource data, formulate alternatives, evaluate alternatives, and help with the selection of alternatives, as well as implementation of the plan and evaluation of the plan.

Product or Service Lines
1. Conservation Plans.
NRCS develops conservation plans with customers for a geographic area they define. The scale of the plans include:

- *Site-specific Plan:* Site-specific conservation plans usually refers to a farm or ranch operating unit but may also be developed for a group. Conservation plans may include program plans and whole farm plans developed with automated aids and GIS systems (Customer Service Tool Kit).
- *Area-wide Plan:* Area-wide and community based Conservation Plans or Area Conservation Assessments integrate social, economic, and ecological concerns over a defined geographical area. An area-wide plan is generally at a larger scale than a site-specific plan and allows the client or stakeholder to assess natural resource concerns, determine what conditions are to be desired, and formulate alternatives in achieving plan objectives.
- *Watershed Plan:* Watershed plans include the formulation of integrated proposals for the entire watershed with natural resource management in which local decision-makers make informed choices that depend on the objectives and priorities of the people living in the area.

2. Technical Consultations and Planning Assistance.
Professional advice is provided to customers to help them make decisions about natural resource management. This service may or may not lead to a plan or a commitment to a plan. Planning assistance includes some or all of the following components: identify natural resource problems and opportunities, determine objectives, inventory resources, analyze resource

data, formulate alternatives, evaluate alternatives, select alternatives, and implement and evaluate the plan. It also includes assistance to USDA program customers who seek to maintain eligibility with highly erodible land and wetland conservation compliance. Technical assistance is also provided to customers who seek to comply with other Federal, State, or local ordinances and environmental regulations.

Consultations and Planning Assistance includes assistance to communities, units of government or Tribes, and the planners within those groups who use their own planning process.

NRCS Business Line: Conservation Implementation

Conservation Implementation assists operators and landowners in installing conservation treatments, management measures, and management systems that result in improved treatment of the resources.

Product or Services Lines
1. Designs.
Designs are prepared for engineering and management practices that meet established technical standards and specifications. The preparation of operation and maintenance guidelines are an important part of this process. This product includes the surveys, field layout of conservation practices, spot checks, inspection, and as-built designs for engineering and management practices.

2. Follow-up.
Follow-up is conducted with a client during planning and implementation and following implementation. Guidance and coordination are provided for implementing the next treatment. Operation and maintenance requirements are reviewed with the client. Follow-up includes more formal, annual Program Status Reviews to assess the status of contracts, planning needs, and the function of installed practices.

3. Conservation Compliance Checks and Reviews.
Mandated reviews ensure that USDA program participants are meeting their responsibility to protect highly erodible land and wetlands.

NRCS Business Line: Natural Resources Inventory and Assessment

Natural Resources Inventory and Assessment includes the acquisition, development, interpretation, and delivery of natural resource data and information for natural resource planning, decision making, and program and policy development at multiple scales.

Product or Service Lines
1. Protocols and Procedures for Gathering and Delivering Data.
Protocols and procedures for natural-resource data acquisition, development, analysis, management, and delivery provide systematic and reliable information for resource management decisions. This product and service line includes:

- Processes for acquiring, aggregating, archiving, and integrating data. Examples include:
  - Sample design, data collection protocols, and systematic data interpretation for the National Cooperative Soil Survey (NCSS).

- Sample design, data collection protocols, and statistical estimation techniques for the National Resources Inventory (NRI).

- Spatial criteria for Common Resource Areas, Major Land Resource Areas, soil map unit delineations, digital elevation data, and digital ortho-photoquads.

- Scientific protocols for quantifying the effects of conservation programs and practices.

- Procedures for "Business-Case" development. The result is a definition of the data quality requirements that drive the product.

2. Databases and Data Delivery. User-oriented delivery and maintenance of geospatial datasets and information. This product and service line includes:

- Geospatial datasets and products for field office Customer Service Toolkit plug-ins including:

- Digital elevation data, faster graphics, streams, transportation, and digital ortho-photoquads.

- Boundary datasets—watersheds, Soil and Water Conservation District boundaries, common resource areas, RC&D program areas, and major land resource areas.

- Technical datasets for scientists, service providers, and land users. Technical datasets include soil survey databases (National Soil Information System [NASIS]), laboratory data, Official Soil Survey Descriptions); NRI database; Snow Survey Telemetry (SNOTEL) database; PLANTS database; and Climate Information data access databases.

- Web-based geospatial data access portals. The portals include Geospatial Data Gateway, Web Soil Survey, and Soil Data Mart.

3. Assessments and Analyses. Natural resource data and model results are interpreted and analyzed to inform decision makers and facilitate policy development. This product and service line includes conservation effects assessments, resource condition and trends assessments (e.g., NRI findings on wetlands, land use, and soil erosion trends), climate assessments and drought monitoring, water supply forecasts, soil survey interpretations, etc.

NRCS Business Line: Natural Resource Technology Transfer

Natural Resource Technology Transfer evaluates, acquires, develops, and transfers conservation tools, techniques, and standards based on research and new technologies. This includes the production and delivery of technical tools used in resource assessment, conservation planning, and conservation system installation, including computer applications, standards and guidance documents, criteria, and plant materials, and the development and delivery of training in the use of NRCS tools and methodologies in conservation planning and the design of conservation practices and systems.

Product or Service Lines

1. Technology Tools.

- *Standards:* NRCS conservation practice standards provide guidance for applying conservation technology on the land and set the minimum level for acceptable application of the technology for conservation of the affected resource at a sustainable use level. NRCS issues national conservation practice standards in its National Handbook of Conservation Practices (NHCP).

- *Specifications:* Specification documents (job sheets, drawings, plans, etc.) establish the technical details and workmanship required to install the conservation practice in accordance with the requirements of the conservation practice standard.

- *Guides and References:* Guides and References are developed as the primary scientific reference for NRCS program implementation. Technical guides, called Field Office Technical Guides (FOTG) are localized so they apply to the specific geographic area for which they are prepared. There is a FOTG for each local conservation district in the U.S. Parts of the FOTG are automated and Web-based. Technical References are scientifically based guidance that includes a number of handbooks, training guides, manuals, and technical resources. Much of this guidance is available in electronic format. Topics include animal husbandry, conservation engineering, ecological sciences, and resource economics.

- *Computer applications:* These tools support conservation planning and implementation and provide land users with alternatives for making decisions that will reduce soil erosion, reduce sedimentation, maintain soil resources, and enhance other aspects of environmental quality. Examples of these tools include Technical Release 55 (TR-55) for calculating runoff in built up areas, Nutrient Balance (NutBal), the Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation II (RUSLE II), and the Wind Erosion Equation (WEQ) program.

- *Modeling and Information Systems:* Models respond to agricultural and environmental questions and support natural resource assessment. Examples of products and services include Water Supply Forecasting System, Soil Climate Analysis Network, EPIC (Erosion Productivity-Impact Calculator) and CENTURY (soil organic matter model).

2. Training and Certification.
A training support structure exists to provide technical training in a formal setting and in local informal training sessions regarding the use of new technology, updated technology, and practical use of technology in the field. Certification standards and procedures are developed and administered.

3. Plant Materials.
Development, testing, and transfer of state-of-the-art plant science technology helps meet customer and resource needs including water and wind erosion reduction, water management, biomass technology, control of invasive species, and wildlife habitat elements.

NRCS Business Line: Financial Assistance

Financial Assistance includes cost share and monetary incentives through program contracts, easements, or other means to qualified program participants who participate in authorized USDA NRCS conservation programs. Financial assistance helps motivate producers to treat natural resource problems and to help sustain natural resources.

Product or Service Lines

1. Cost-share/Incentives.

- Cost-share payments are made available to reimburse program participants for part of the expense incurred for installing one or more conservation practices that optimize environmental benefits while achieving agricultural and environmental quality goals. The cost share is usually a percentage of the cost shown in the contract. The participant's expenses might include money, labor, or equipment. The program participant submits bills and other documentation to support a request for payment.
- Incentive payments are provided as monetary or financial assistance to the participant in an amount and at a rate determined appropriate to encourage the participant to perform a land management practice that would not otherwise be initiated without program assistance.

2. Easements.

Easements are offered to protect conservation or natural-resource-related interest in land defined and delineated in a deed whereby the landowner conveys rights, title, and/or interests in a property to the grantee. However, the landowner retains general ownership and control of the property.

3. Grants.

Grants are offered to establish a relationship between NRCS and a State or local government or other recipient. The principal purpose of the relationship is the transfer of value to a recipient in order to accomplish a public purpose of support or stimulation authorized by Federal law. Substantial Federal involvement is not anticipated. These grants may be funded up to 100 percent by NRCS.

4. Stewardship Payments.

Stewardship payments allows the Agency to direct financial assistance to participants as a way to influence the continued protection and sustainability of natural resources, which includes soil, water, air, plants, and animals.