

Subpart A - Locally Led Conservation Defined

500.0 Executive Summary

Locally led conservation consists of a series of phases that involve community stakeholders in natural resource planning, implementation of solutions, and evaluation of results. Locally led conservation begins with the community itself, working through the local conservation district. It is based on the principle that community stakeholders are best suited to deal with local resource problems. Generally, the locally led process will involve the phases listed in figure 500-A1.

Figure 500-A1

Phase	Activity	Further Information
1. Public Involvement and the Conservation Needs Assessment	The conservation district leads the effort to gather public input from a broad range of agencies, organizations, businesses, and individuals in the local area who have an interest in natural resource conditions and needs. These community stakeholders evaluate natural resource conditions in a conservation needs assessment and establish broad conservation goals to meet those needs.	Section 500.3.
2. Conservation Action Plan	The conservation district involves community stakeholders developing and agreeing on a conservation action plan that documents decisions and time schedules, identifies priorities, sets goals, and identifies Government and nongovernment programs to meet those needs. Community stakeholders, under conservation district leadership, identify which Government and nongovernment programs are needed to address specific natural resource concerns. Note: USDA conservation programs are just some of the many programs that can be used to satisfy the community's goals and needs.	Section 500.4.
3. Implementation of the Conservation Action Plan	Community stakeholders, under conservation district leadership, obtain Government and nongovernment program resources and assist in implementing the programs that can satisfy the community's goals and needs, as identified in the action plan.	Section 500.5.
4. Evaluation of the Conservation Action Plan	The effectiveness of plan implementation should be evaluated to ensure that the community stakeholders' planned goals and objectives are achieved. An evaluation should be made to determine where the actual results differ from those anticipated. The difference may result in retracing one or more of the steps in the locally led conservation effort.	Section 500.6.

500.1 Locally Led Conservation Defined

A. Definition of Locally Led Conservation

- (1) Essentially, "locally led conservation" is community stakeholders performing all of the following:
 - (i) Assessing their natural resource conservation needs
 - (ii) Setting community conservation goals
 - (iii) Developing an action plan
 - (iv) Obtaining resources to carry out the plan
 - (v) Implementing solutions
 - (vi) Measuring their success
- (2) These actions have been grouped into four major activities for the purpose of this guidance:
 - (i) Conservation needs assessment
 - (ii) Conservation action plan
 - (iii) Action plan implementation

(iv) Evaluation of results

B. The Locally Led Principle

Locally led conservation is based on the principle that community stakeholders are best suited to identify and resolve local natural resource problems. Thus, community stakeholders are keys to successfully managing and protecting their natural resources. It challenges neighbors, both urban and rural, to work together and take responsibility for addressing local resource needs.

C. Definition of the Word "Local"

The word "local" can mean a county, a portion of a county, a watershed, a multicounty region, or whatever geographic area is best suited to address the resource conservation needs identified. Local may also include specific sectors of a county, watershed, region, or community with common resource concerns. This may include but is not limited to groups based on operational type (organic, specialty crop, etc.), groups based on operator type (limited-resource, family-owned farms, retirees, etc.), or groups based on other mutual resource concerns.

D. Primary Focus: Resource Concerns

(1) It is important to keep in mind that locally led conservation must be driven by natural resource conservation needs rather than by programs. Its primary focus should be to identify natural resource concerns, along with related economic and social concerns. Once the natural resource concerns are identified, appropriate Federal, State, local, and nongovernmental program tools can be used, both individually and in combination, to address these resource concerns and attempt to meet the established goals of the community stakeholders.

500.2 Locally Led Leadership and Public Involvement

A. Locally Led Leadership

(1) While there is a wide range of groups that may be in a position to lead a local conservation effort, conservation districts, under State or Tribal law, are charged with facilitating cooperation and agreements between agencies, landowners, and others; developing comprehensive conservation plans; and bringing those plans to the attention of landowners and others in their district. Thus, conservation districts are experienced in assessing resource needs, determining priorities, and coordinating programs to meet those needs and priorities.

(2) Conservation districts are the logical group to coordinate locally led conservation due to their connections to Federal, State, Tribal, and local governments; private resources; and the public. Therefore, further discussion of the locally led effort presumes that districts will provide primary leadership; however, leadership can come from any willing and interested group.

(3) Refer to section 500.10 for the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) guidance document, "Locally Led Conservation: An Overview for Conservation Districts."

B. Public Involvement

(1) Input from a broad range of agencies, organizations, businesses, and individuals in the local area that have an interest in natural resource management and are familiar with local resource needs and conditions is an essential element of locally led conservation. These representatives should reflect the diversity of the residents, landowners, and land operators in the local area.

(2) The NACD documents "Locally Led Conservation: An Overview for Conservation Districts" and "Conservation District Board Member Recruitment and Community Outreach Guide" provide suggested guidelines for public outreach efforts and ways to reach out to underserved communities.

C. NRCS Role and Responsibilities

NRCS will support the locally led conservation effort by—

- (i) Providing assistance in identifying conservation needs.
- (ii) Providing technical and program advice to the community stakeholders throughout the effort.
- (iii) Assisting in developing and implementing strategies to include socially and economically disadvantaged groups in the locally led effort.

Note: It is not the responsibility of the designated conservationist to lead the locally led effort. NRCS's task is to support the process and provide technical information upon request.

500.3 The Conservation Needs Assessment

A. Introduction

A conservation needs assessment is the first step and a critical element of locally led conservation. With input and resource data from all interested parties, this assessment should provide a comprehensive evaluation of the condition of the area's natural resource base and will be the platform for making decisions about local priorities and policies for conservation programs delivered at the local level.

B. Definition of a Conservation Needs Assessment

(1) The conservation needs assessment is a comprehensive analysis of the work that needs to be done to achieve broad conservation goals set by community stakeholders and to solve natural resource problems. This assessment should be based on public input and science-based information. It should include a detailed analysis of natural resource concerns within the area.

To ensure versatility in all program areas, it is important that this needs assessment be resource-based, not program-based.
(2) The conservation action plan that results from the conservation needs assessment will identify the tools that can be used to satisfy the needs.

C. Purpose of the Conservation Needs Assessment

- (1) The purpose of the conservation needs assessment is to ensure that conservation efforts address the most important local resource needs. The assessment will be the basis for selecting the type and extent of needed conservation systems and practices. It will also be the basis for making recommendations on funding priorities and priority areas to be addressed by the various conservation programs available.
- (2) The conservation needs assessment is the foundation for carrying out Federal programs such as the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). From a resource concern identification standpoint, this conservation needs assessment may also be used to assist localities in implementing the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, as well as many State, Tribal, and local programs that provide assistance to private land owners and managers.

D. NRCS Roles and Responsibilities

- (1) The NRCS designated conservationist will support, where requested, the development of the conservation needs assessment by—
 - (i) Providing assistance in assembling natural resource inventories and data.
 - (ii) Assisting in analyzing the data and other information.
 - (iii) Providing information on socioeconomic factors involved in determining the conservation needs.
- (2) For specific guidance on resource assessment, consult steps one through four of the areawide planning process in the National Planning Procedures Handbook (NPPH).

500.4 The Conservation Action Plan

A. Introduction and Identification of Leadership

Using the conservation needs assessment, the conservation district involves community stakeholders to develop and agree on an action plan, generally referred to as a “conservation action plan.”

B. The Conservation Action Plan

This plan will—

- (i) Identify natural resource conservation priorities.
- (ii) Set measurable conservation goals and objectives.
- (iii) Identify conservation technology needed to achieve these goals and objectives.
- (iv) Identify responsibility for action and create a time schedule for completion of elements.
- (v) Identify Federal, State, Tribal, local, and nongovernment programs and services needed to address specific conservation needs.
- (vi) Identify a need to develop new programs or processes to address those problems not covered by existing programs.

C. NRCS Roles and Responsibilities

- (1) The NRCS designated conservationist will support the development of the conservation action plan by—
 - (i) Providing overall planning assistance.
 - (ii) Identifying non-USDA programs that may be of assistance.
 - (iii) Explaining appropriate USDA conservation programs and services.
- (2) For specific guidance on planning assistance, consult steps five through seven of the areawide planning process in the NPPH.

500.5 Implementing the Conservation Action Plan

A. Introduction

- (1) Implementation of the conservation action plan means that the community stakeholders, with the leadership of the conservation district, obtain the needed programs and services to address the problems identified by their conservation needs assessment.
- (2) In this step, they coordinate existing assistance, available through private organizations, Federal, State, Tribal, and local agencies, including USDA; ensure that appropriate program application processes are followed; develop detailed proposals for new programs; and seek financial, educational, and technical assistance as necessary.

B. NRCS Roles and Responsibilities

- (1) The NRCS designated conservationist will support the implementation of the conservation action plan by—
 - (i) Explaining, interpreting, and clarifying USDA rules, regulations, and procedures.
 - (ii) Providing input on other potential sources of assistance from Federal, State, Tribal, and local government or private sources.
 - (iii) Implementing designated roles and responsibilities as defined in Part 502, “USDA Conservation Program Delivery.”
- (2) For specific guidance, see step eight of the areawide planning process in the NPPH.

500.6 Evaluating Results

A. Introduction

Locally led conservation does not end when the conservation action plan has been implemented. The effectiveness of plan implementation should be evaluated to ensure that the community stakeholders' planned goals and objectives are achieved. An evaluation should be made to determine where the actual results differ from those anticipated. This difference may result in retracing one or more of the steps in the locally led conservation effort.

B. NRCS Roles and Responsibilities

- (1) The NRCS designated conservationist will support the conservation district and the community stakeholders in evaluating the results of their locally led conservation efforts by—
 - (i) Assisting in the evaluation process.
 - (ii) Providing updated natural resources information and assessments.
 - (iii) Keeping them aware of changes in the USDA programs and the program delivery process.
 - (iv) Assisting in interpreting the impact of conservation action plan implementation on the condition of the natural resources.
- (2) Refer to step nine of the areawide planning process in the NPPH for specific guidance.

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