

Cultural Resources and Your Conservation Project



What are Cultural Resources?

Cultural resources are all the past activities and accomplishments of people. They include buildings, objects made or used by people (artifacts), features (fire pits), special use sites (stone quarries), and less tangible resources such as dance forms, stories, and ceremonial traditions.

The cultural resources that the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) deals with most often are known as historic properties. These may be pre-contact or historic archeological sites, buildings, structures, features, or objects. The most common type of historic properties NRCS staff encounters are archeological sites. These sites often exist below the soil surface and must be protected when conservation practices are used that disturb the earth at the site. Cultural resources are non-renewable and irreplaceable. There is no way to “create” a new archeological site or historic farm house once it has been destroyed.

Why Does NRCS Care About Cultural Resources?

For Resource Conservation

NRCS considers cultural resources in its conservation planning for the same reason it protects natural resources – the soil, water, plants, and animals on your property. Keeping natural resources in balance helps provide the basis for a healthy and profitable farm environment; protecting cultural resources provides the basis for understanding our human past. We are the stewards of the soil and water on our

property, the organisms that inhabit it, and the heritage information that it contains.

Because it's the Law

Recognizing the importance of cultural heritage, Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) in



1966. The NHPA establishes a policy for protecting important cultural resources (also called historic properties). The NHPA requires federal agencies to consider cultural resources in their activities and to determine if significant historic properties will be adversely affected by those activities.

Nationally, NRCS has established procedures for training conservation planners and partners to complete limited field reviews and recognize some cultural resources during conservation planning. This helps ensure that cultural resources are protected during earth-disturbing conservation activities. In addition, NRCS has Cultural Resources Specialists (CRS) and Cultural Resources Coordinators (CRC) on staff across the country to help provide additional assistance when cultural resources are encountered.

Private Property Rights and Human Remains

Landowners with historic properties on their land have ownership of that historic property with the exceptions of human remains, grave markers (including burial mounds), and the artifacts found in association with graves and human remains. Human burials and their associated objects are the property of the state.

Non-grave artifacts from archeological sites are the property of the landowner. A landowner may choose to disturb a historic property, but they cannot receive federal assistance or funding to do so. If an earthmoving activity disturbs human remains, the landowner is required to contact the state police and the coroner's office immediately.





Cultural Resources Field Procedures

NRCS seeks to identify, evaluate, and avoid the destruction of cultural resources. Projects using NRCS funding to implement an activity in a conservation plan must follow these general cultural resources protection procedures.

Step 1: Decide if proposed conservation activities are earth-disturbing. Activities that involve heavy equipment and extensive earth disturbance have the potential to impact cultural resources.

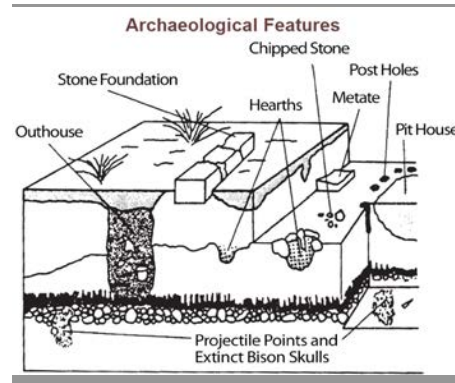
Step 2: Determine the entire area that will be altered during conservation practice construction. This can include the area where activities are planned, but it can also include additional areas for activities such as equipment staging and material borrowing.

Step 3: Examine the area for evidence of cultural resources on the soil surface (cellar holes, stone foundations, wells, and dams). This step will be completed by a trained NRCS conservation planner or partner at no cost to the property owner or applicant. NRCS cultural resources personnel will review the planned conservation practice(s) to determine if a site investigation is needed.

Step 4: Avoid the cultural resource if one is present. This may involve moving the location of the conservation practice or selecting a different, non-destructive conservation practice. Most projects with cultural resources present can be easily avoided.

Step 5: If the cultural resources cannot be avoided, the NRCS archaeologist will evaluate the significance of the cultural resource. In most cases the expense of the professional investigation is the responsibility of NRCS and not the landowner.

Step 6: If the cultural resource is determined to be insignificant, the landowner and NRCS may proceed with the conservation practice.



However, if the resource is significant and cannot be avoided or an alternative practice cannot be agreed upon, the cultural resource must be "mitigated." Mitigation is an action that reduces the harmful effect on the site and may consist of moving a historic building out of harm's way or documenting its architecture before destruction; excavation of an archeological site to recover important information; or constructing a protective barrier around or over the historic property.

There may be occasions when the landowner does not want to proceed with the mitigation. If no alternative conservation can be implemented,

NRCS will withdraw assistance on that particular conservation activity, and the landowner may proceed with the conservation practice but at their own expense.

Procedures for Discovery During Construction

If artifacts, building foundations, or human remains are uncovered during practice implementation, the contractor must stop work and NRCS must be contacted. The NRCS conservationist and cultural resources personnel will take steps to protect the site until it can be evaluated for significance. Steps 5 and 6 described previously will be conducted.

Additional Information

For more information about Cultural Resources, contact the Rhode Island NRCS Ecological Sciences office at:

60 Quaker Lane, Suite 46
Warwick, RI 02886
401-828-1300

NRCS cultural resources information is also available online at: www.nrcs.usda.gov/cultural-resources

