

01-15-2019

Happy New Year to all employees,

In an effort to share an overview for the ongoing work and efforts completed during FY18, listed below you will find the latest information about our activities and plans for the future for the National Conservation Planning Partnership (NCPPI).

### **LISTENING SESSIONS**

Over 1,035 participated in the eight listening sessions held during 2018. The sessions held in Indiana, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, North Carolina, Texas, Washington and Wyoming provided employees, producers, conservation district supervisors and other partners an opportunity to provide feedback directly to NCPPI and state leaders on their ability and interest in delivering planning assistance to customers.

The feedback and information shared was extensive and provided us a deeper understanding of the current challenges and opportunities related to conservation planning. A report is being compiled that will guide NCPPI future actions. Once it is complete it will be shared with you. In the meantime, here are a few of the top recommendations.

- Improve internal communications by using clear and consistent messaging and direction.
- Apply transparent, common-sense methodologies to business and planning tools that are customer friendly and that can be tailored to locally-established priorities.
- Provide a simplified access point to on-line tools that will reduce duplication, increase engagement and allow for the expansion of technology to improve the planning process.
- Streamline financial assistance program processes to increase workload efficiency and quality assurance.
- Review and update policy to ensure ranking criteria is consistent with statutory requirements.
- Ensure planners can address diverse customer and resource needs by implementing realistic and effective training options at the national, regional and/or state level.
- Promote the benefits of conservation planning and implementation by utilizing results of monitoring and modeling data (e.g., CEAP) as it becomes available that shows the effectiveness of conservation practices.
- Adopt a simplified planning process that will increase engagement and allow for the continuous implementation of a conservation plan.

### **HUGH HAMMOND BENNETT AWARD – NEW CATEGORY**

We are excited to announce a new conservation planner category as part of the *Hugh Hammond Bennett Award for Conservation Excellence*. This award that was rolled out last year in honor of our founding father and as a way to recognize individuals who have exemplified outstanding service through development and implementation of sound conservation planning. Awards will be presented at the 2019 National NACD Conference in February.

## **NCPP WEBSITE AND COMMUNICATIONS**

NCPP leaders have identified a need to have a centralized location for information for our internal and external customers, as well as our partners, so we have begun efforts to build a website that will house many resources for planners and that will direct customers to the appropriate on-line assistance, such as farmers.gov. We are also looking at more efficient ways to communicate NCPP updates directly with employees and members without having to rely on each partner to forward information.

## **CONSERVATION PLANNING CERTIFICATION POLICY REVISIONS**

The NRCS Conservation Planning Certification Policy that was released a year ago was revised in October of 2018 to clarify and fine-tune certification requirements.

<https://directives.sc.egov.usda.gov/42771.wba>. Changes include:

- The Technical Specialist Planner was added to the section of the three primary designations, so it is no longer a separate section.
- The policy clarifies who is required to have planner designations:
  - NRCS employees with conservation planning as a major duty included in their official position description.
  - Partner organization or agency employees acting on behalf of NRCS and independently assisting customers through the nine-step conservation planning process for developing RMS or progressive conservation plans for NRCS conservation programs
  - Other NRCS or partner employees, Tribal members or employees, or private sector service providers (including TSPs) may be designated any of the four planner roles based on agency need and approval by the State Conservationist.
- Clarification was provided for electronic signing of plans.
- Partner or private sector conservation planner (including TSPs) candidates will not be required to complete Conservation Planning Business Tools training if they do not have access to the appropriate NRCS conservation planning application.
- Training requirements for each planner designation and planning entity were modified, moved and/or further described.

## **TOOLS**

NRCS continues to move forward with development of the web-based planning and contracting software, Conservation Desktop. Conservation Desktop integrates a number of independent systems such as Conservation Client Gateway, Document Management System (DMS), as well as Customer Service Toolkit, and ProTracts.

Conservation Desktop is now available with some functionality. Training for staff and partners has been initiated in many states and will continue as new versions with added features are released in 2019. Version 2.2 is planned for release in March or April of 2019 with the following functions:

- Create and edit practices
- Create conservation plan (record of decision) and plan maps
- Request assistance for plans, site visits, or brief technical assistance
- Manage state and local geospatial data
- Manage state and service center cost lists
- Manage document templates
- Import Legacy Toolkit files to DMS
- Enter non-USDA client information

A late summer 2019 toolkit replacement release (Version 2.3) is planned that will allow planners to:

- Generate soils maps and reports
- Create agreement items and submit to ProTracts
- Create schedule of operations 1155/1156
- Use GIS Tools - import/export shapefiles and easement tools
- Access integrated Conservation Assessment and Ranking Tool (CART) information

### **NEW PARTNERS**

Conservation planning and its numerous benefits are of interest to many of our agricultural and conservation partners and affiliates and they are watching our progress with interest. NCPP leaders are currently discussing a strategy that will allow us to include a variety of public and private partners in future NCPP efforts, especially in outreach to our common constituents. Watch for more in the near future.

We encourage you to continue to meet with your state's conservation partners and affiliates to discuss NCPP and how best to accomplish sound conservation planning. Please share this information with your employees and members to help us keep the communications channels open as we work together to provide high quality customer service for America's private landowners.

Sincerely,



Astor Boozer  
REGIONAL CONSERVATIONIST,  
NCPP Co-Chair



Mike Brown  
Executive Director, NASCA  
NCPP Co-Chair