

Third Party Technical Assistance in Conservation Planning

By Mike McGrath

The passage of the 2002 Farm Bill marks the greatest increase in conservation spending in the history of federal farm policy. Increases in spending on existing conservation programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Conservation Reserve Program, the Wetland Reserve Program, and Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program, as well the addition of the new Conservation Security Program and the Grasslands Reserve Program, will bring the total increase in conservation spending to over \$17 billion.

For the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), this huge increase in funding for federal conservation programs will require additional help. The implementation of an expanded Third Party Vendor Technical Assistance Program to assist the NRCS and agricultural producers in the development of conservation plans will be necessary.

While the 1996 Farm Bill broadened the authority of the NRCS to use Third Party Vendors to provide technical assistance, the 2002 Farm Bill provides increased authority and incentives to use Third Party Vendors. Assistance by Third Party Vendors will cover both conservation planning and application of practices.

Before the farm bill was even out of the conference committee, the NRCS began soliciting input from stakeholders on how Third Party Vendors might be used on an expanded level.

At an NRCS-sponsored public input meeting in Minnesota in mid-April, State Conservationist Bill Hunt spoke to large group of conservation professionals and agricultural representatives about the development of a new, expanded Third Party Technical Assistance program.

In the words of Mr. Hunt, “We want to make this program work in a quality manner for producers. Do not look at the steps as hurdles. We do not want to replace NRCS employees with third party vendors or Conservation District employees. We want to add to the conservation team. We want to look at this from the pros and cons. How can we make this process work? Help us expand the conservation team.”

As a leader in the development of the Conservation Security Program, the Minnesota Project came forward to make recommendations to the NRCS for guidelines governing the use of non-USDA technical assistance providers.

The following five points highlight those recommendations:

1. Third Party Vendor Certification: Certification requirements should be developed that assure that a vendor demonstrates the technical knowledge needed to effectively assist farmers.

- Certification should be open to non-profit groups, farmers, independent crop certifiers, and organic certifiers with demonstrated skills, and not limited to any special group.
- Certification application should allow a combination of experience, credentials and training.
- Third Party Technical Assistance Vendors should be certified for specific conservation practices, avoiding blanket certification where expertise has not been demonstrated. For example, someone might be certified to assist with nutrient management plans but not with wildlife habitat plans.

2. Funding Assistance: Payments to farmers and ranchers for cost share should include pass through dollars for payment of fees for third party assistance.

3. NRCS Approval and oversight: The NRCS should review and approve 100% of all conservation plans, including those developed by all third party technical assistance providers, to ensure compliance with technical guidance.

4. NRCS should serve as the linchpin for plan integration. The role of the NRCS should not be diminished, but strengthened in the use of third party technical assistance vendors. Funding for increased staff to provide technical assistance will be needed for the NRCS to strengthen its role as the overseer and the review authority for all conservation plans and practice installation. NRCS staff should ensure that plans with multiple technical advisors are integrated into an effective, efficient whole farm plan.

5. Certification requirements should be developed in a manner that ensures the greatest integrity of the third party technical assistance vendors and avoids any real or apparent conflicts of interest with respect to conservation recommendations and sales of agricultural products. Farmers should be advised of all options for addressing their conservation problems, and should not be influenced to purchase inputs, equipment, or contractor assistance through the conservation planning process.

The Conservation Security Program embodies the principle of flexibility. The key to the success of implementing this important conservation legislation will be the program's ability to serve producers in a timely and producer-friendly manner. Other technical advisors who are qualified to assist with the planning and development of specific conservation practices should be welcomed into the process to assist the NRCS, farmers, and ranchers in making it work.